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THE TOYMAKER

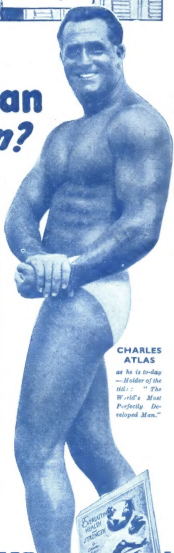
By Raymond F. Jones



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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

THE TOYMAKER

By RAYMOND F. JONES

The Imaginos were silly, lumpy little dolls—but the kids were crazy about them. In fact—they were so crazy about them that the destiny of the planet hung on them!

It was a little shop with a narrow front, he finally located it there was no mistake far down on one of the side streets of either the street or the shop. As he Curran City. Horril Street was one of the small store there was increasing those insignificant alleys about which the heavy traffic of children afoot and in cars of all descriptions driven by parents who waited austere outside while the children went in to make a selection from the identically unbeautiful Imaginos.

They knew him by no other name. He had asked them simply to call him Mr. Toymaker. They were quite willing to do that for he was certainly the best toymaker in the whole System.

His toys were truly toys. Only children, and a rare adult with the simple beliefs of a child, could find anything in the little shapeless Imaginos which he sold. To these, however, the ugly figurines came alive and formed a new world where all the adventure and romance dreamed by children of every world could come true. To those who were not children in spirit they were nothing but little, dull, meaningless clods.

The child in magnificent Curran City who did not have a set of the Imaginos was considered pitifully unfortunate by his fellows. The Toymaker had needed only to sell a single set of the fabulous Imaginos and he had no further need of advertising.

Reas Corper, newsman, had sensed a feature story in watching his own ten year old son sit in fascinated worlds of fancy before the images which remained silent, motionless and ugly to Reas himself. They were poorly shaped, carved without skill or imagination, yet they opened the delights of a new world to the boy.

Reas Corper didn't understand it. It made him a little uncomfortable when his son exclaimed in exasperation, "Gee, Dad, all you have to do is believe they walk and talk, and they do!"

Reas had some difficulty in finding the street at first. No one he asked was quite sure where Horril Street was. But when

The interior of the shop and its lighting were indifferent. There was certainly little of imagination about the place itself. No touch of decoration lightened the severity of the plain walls and the shelves loaded with thousands of the brightly colored Imaginos. Perhaps it was all deliberately planned to give the poorly shaped little figurines something against which to display their doubtful splendor.

As Reas Corper sauntered into the shop he saw scores of children gathered in excited groups about the various clusters of Imaginos. There were squeals of delight and sharp gasps of breathless wonder as they saw some particularly entrancing specimen—which differed no whit from its fellows, Reas thought.

There were a few puzzled parents standing, like himself, a bit miffed and attempting to appear indifferent, yet secretly puzzled by the thing which the children found so attractive, and which meant nothing whatever to the adults.

Reas moved towards a solitary twelve-year-old who stood open-mouthed before one small grouping.

"Is that a good one?" Reas said abruptly.

The youngster turned as if startled out of a far dream. "Oh, yes! I'd like that one!"

"What's it doing? Tell me it."

"Can't you see, honest, mister? Everybody at home says they can't see what fun I get out of these. All anybody has to do is believe."

Reas concentrated on the doughlike masses for a moment. "Just no go, I guess," he said. "When you get to be my age and work as a newsman besides, you don't believe in anything any more. I guess that's my trouble. Tell me what they are doing."

"This fellow here is on a pirate vessel in disguise. He's going to capture them all, he hopes, but right now he's in an awful jam because they've found out who he is. I wish I owned the set so I could see how he gets out of it."

Reas laughed. "Here, if you can dream up a yarn like that out of those dough faces you deserve to finish it." He handed the boy enough money to buy the set.

"Oh, thanks, mister. Thanks—!"

Reas' smile turned to bewilderment as he watched the boy scamper away. He turned back to the little Imaginos lining the shelves and walls of the toy shop.

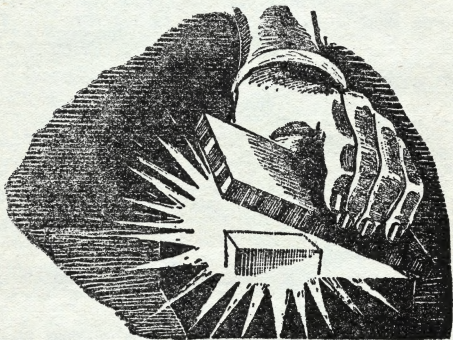
What magical powers did these little

"I'm from the *System*. So many people have been fascinated by the stories of your little toys that I'd like to find out something about them, and about you. How do they work?"

The Toymaker smiled. "You have to believe. That's all."

"I know. That's what the little fellow over there told me. That's what my own son tells me. But the things still look like nothing but pygmies with pointed heads. I'll never believe they are anything but that."

"That is the trouble with most of us adults. We haven't the courage to believe, as children have."



figures, carved without obvious skill, possess? You have to believe, the youngster had said. Obviously, Reas was never going to believe these little masses were the dream creatures the children thought them to be, no matter how hard he tried.

He turned back to the shopful of customers, looking for the Toymaker, whom he had come to interview. There were several clerks waiting on the children, but a rather stooped old man was coming towards him, pleasantly smiling.

"You are finding what you want?" the old man said.

Reas grinned frankly. "I'm not finding anything. Are you the man the kids call Mr. Toymaker?"

"Yes, I am he."

"But it doesn't seem healthy. It sounds as if the toys are like drugs, inspiring dreams with an unhealthy reality."

"Are dreams unhealthy? Dreams have been the inspiration of genius throughout the history of the race, and our great literature is only the recording of dreams. Without dreams, the race would have perished."

"But what of the effect upon the children? Does the dream persist when they put the Imaginos away?"

"No more than does any vividly written story which they might read."

Reas Corper regarded the old man closely. Somewhere he had seen that stooped figure before—in quite different surroundings—he was sure of it.

"You look familiar to me," said Reas. "What is your name?"

The old man shrugged. "I've lived all my life in Curran City. You could have seen me before. What I have done before in my life has no significance towards what I am doing now. I prefer to be known only as the Toymaker."

"I know you!" Reas exclaimed as recollection came flooding back. "You are Professor Theorn, Rold Theorn, formerly holding the Chair of Peace at Curran University."

"Yes . . . yes, I was Rold Theorn, Professor of Peace. Now I am only the Toymaker."

"But I don't understand! You were the greatest Professor of Peace the University ever had. Why did you give that up to become proprietor of an obscure little toy shop? Surely there must have been a reason!"

"Yes. There was a reason, all right," said Theorn. "In a warrior world there is no place for a Chair of Peace on the University staff. The subject of Peace is only an academic one in the world of political struggle that constitutes our rulers' chief activity."

"I see. So you resigned in protest and turned your talents to something neutral. Is that it?"

"Something like that," said Theorn.

There was a sudden commotion in front of the store as a luxurious car pulled up and two figures stepped out.

"Callimus, the Senator!" Reas exclaimed. "You really do get the customers down here, don't you? They say he'll be in the presidency next year. With his son recommending the Imaginos you shouldn't have any trouble boosting your sales."

Theorn, the toymaker, scurried towards the door. "Welcome," he said to Callimus, and Derrold, his ten year old son. "The toyshop is honored by your patronage."

Callimus glanced disdainfully about the plain room. "My son has heard of the toys you sell. We should like to look at some. Show us the best that you have."

Theorn glanced down at the sharp, sensitive features of the boy. "Yes," he said thoughtfully, "I have just the set for you."

He moved towards a counter at the rear of the store. His distinguished customers followed into the shadowy dimness.

"Something military perhaps?" suggested Theorn.

"By all means!" said Callimus. "What

else is fit for toys for a red-blooded boy?"

Theorn caught a fleeting glimpse of the boy's eyes, appealing to him mutely. Military, Theorn thought—the boy had the face of a poet. From his mother, so it was said.

"This is the finest set of Imaginos that I have," said Theorn as he lifted a large box from beneath the counter. "I had hoped that it might grace such a household as yours."

Dramatically, he raised the lid and let it drop back upon the counter. The boy, Derrold, gave a sharp gasp of surprise and pleasure. "It's wonderful! May I have it, Father?"

Callimus gave a snort of disgust and exasperation. "Have what? What are those things? I see nothing but shapeless lumps vaguely resembling people and houses. This is absurd. Is that all you have, Toymaker?"

Theorn turned to Derrold. "What do you see?"

"I see a city," said the boy. "A beautiful city. My friends live there. They are building an enormous building, but they need help with it. I could help them and show them what they need. There is a great pit from which they are taking materials for their city and their buildings. Around the city are gardens—Oh, father! I want this one!"

"This is the craziest thing I ever heard of. I thought you said you had something military, Toymaker."

"Look again," said Theorn. "What are they building for?"

"A war," said Derrold slowly. "A great war. The greatest that the universe has ever seen. They must build to fight and defend. What will they do, Mr. Toymaker? I'm afraid—but I must have this one. My friends are there!"

Theorn looked up into the face of Callimus. "It will teach him much about the tactics and ways of war," he said. "It's the most military outfit I have."

Callimus looked at the shapeless silvered figures. There in the dimness they glistened in a ghostly curiously frightening manner. All of a sudden he wanted to hurl them away and be out of this shop of the mad Toymaker. But that was silly to consider such wild impulses. He was just nervous from the strain of the tense political situation.

"We'll take it," he said abruptly. "The thing is totally absurd, but as long as the boy makes something out of it, it's all right with me. Wrap it up."

Reas Corper, watching from a little distance, glimpsed the silver figurines and

felt something of the same weird menace that troubled Callimus, though he would never have guessed that anything could cause an emotion within the stiff faced Senate leader.

As the pair of figures left through the front door and got into the limousine again, Reas spoke to the Toymaker. "I think that one of these days you are going to have to explain exactly how these little gimcracks of yours operate," he said thoughtfully. The limousine was drifting out of sight around the distant corner.

"It's so simple," said Theorn. "So simple—all you have to do is believe."

Family affairs were quickly forgotten by Callimus, however, as he left Derrold at the estate and drove swiftly to the Capitol where an important meeting with the delegation from Medral, the sixth planet of the System, was to be held—a meeting that might determine whether the future would be consumed in the flames of decimating, interplanetary war or spent in the ways of peace. Callimus was not hopeful for peace. The Medralians were not creatures of peaceful ways.

The leader hurried into the chambers where he presided as head of the important Security Committee, a group whose activities extended like fine, invisible threads into almost every activity of the government. By selection of definitions, they could bring almost any activity under their province, and thus they became the most powerful of the subgroups within the government network, and Callimus was the most powerful figure in the legislative body, so that his name was often spoken in connection with the presidency, for the incumbent president was old and too weak to lead a world at war.

With the appearance of Callimus, the hubbub in the committee chamber died away and the members took their seats. Callimus moved quickly to his place and glanced around.

"The Medralian delegation—where are they?" he demanded.

A short, informal appearing individual, whom Callimus had not noticed at the other end of the table, raised a hand. "I'm it. Singhor, special delegate from Medral. I'm ready to go to work."

Callimus flushed as if he'd been slapped. "You mean that your government has sent only a single delegate to discuss a matter that may determine whether war or peace is to exist?"

"How many more are necessary, as long as I am authorized to make

decisions and agreements?" A sudden, impolite grin came to his lips. "Besides, with only one of us to convince, you'll have a better chance of getting your way. We Medralians are noted as a very stubborn race."

With sternly set jaw, Callimus said, "Our only concern is that your government be bound by your decisions."

"We are noted also for our unanimity of opinion. But let's get down to business. You called this meeting. What's it all about?"

Callimus would never grow accustomed to the Medralian manner of conducting themselves, he thought. There was no sense of formality on even the most solemn occasions. Upon the eve of war, as the Medralians well knew, they sent only a single, politically incompetent delegate. Yet Callimus supposed he was no more incompetent than the rest of his race. The population of Medral was still in political childhood. It was obvious from the fact that during the entire history of the planet they had been the only single, unified nation with scarcely a hint of revolution.

Such a condition did not come about spontaneously among peoples strong in national feelings and mature politically. It came only after long centuries of struggle. It had to be fought for as Jemal had fought so long and bitterly until at last glorious planetary unity had been obtained. And now Jemal could go on until System-wide unity had been obtained, but until that time a benevolent supervision of the activities of the less mature peoples would have to be maintained. The Medralians required the closest watching.

Callimus regarded the single delegate bitterly. It would be long before unity with such politically crude and childish peoples could be obtained.

"We called you specifically regarding the deposits of *schecormium* over which Medral holds custody. You are charged with having permitted extragalactic trade in this material. We have many times made our position clear in the matter. Dispersion of our natural resources cannot be permitted."

"There's plenty of the stuff for everybody."

"You forget that Jemal has none, that we are completely dependent upon the Medralian supply. It is quite necessary to our defense forces."

"First of all, you can trust us to supply all you need; secondly, you worry entirely too much about defense forces."

"It is necessary to be concerned about

defense forces," said Callimus, "when we are forced to bargain for the necessities of our very existence with incompetent and immature peoples who have no comprehension of their true relationship to their neighbors and to the universe. This *schecormium* matter is only the immediate cause of differences between our peoples, as you are well aware, Singhor. Consistently, you have refused to recognize our efforts to preserve and protect the sovereignty of our system. To us, automatically, falls the task of safeguarding the integrity of our six worlds. There must be unity among us. It is the duty of Jemal to enforce that unity, yet Medral has refused time and again to recognize the need for it. The time has come when it is necessary to impress that need upon your minds—by force, if necessary."

The envoy from Medral looked at them soberly. "You speak strangely—you talk of unity and force within the same breath. I think a stranger from another galaxy would think you quite mad. It is almost completely impossible for us of Medral to understand you. Nevertheless, this force, this war which you threaten is not of our choice. We will do anything within reason to avoid it. We will assure you all the *schecormium* for which you have need. We will even allow you to strut about the universe posing as masters and guardians of the six planets as long as you like, but there are certain things we cannot do.

"We cannot allow your continual poking and interference in our scientific affairs. We will not report to your Commission every scientific item which might have a bearing upon the so-called 'security' of the System. We will not contribute to the maintenance of the policing of the boundaries of the System, and we will continue to trade with whom we wish and in what commodities we choose. You should know that our culture is scientifically superior to yours. If aggression is threatened we are far more competent to deal with it than are you. Likewise, if Jemal becomes the aggressor we feel able to deal with your threatened war, though we are aware that such a course would inevitably destroy most of the civilization of both worlds. We know that you have large forces and great weapons, many of them developed by us and turned from peaceful to military uses by you.

"It is inconceivable to us that there should be cause for war, but then the history of other worlds and other systems shows that generally, war has no 'cause'."

"You are politically and socially incompetent to be the judge of such matters," said Callimus. "You are like children playing amid great and dangerous forces of which you have no conception. Though you have agile minds in the field of science and technology, you have no adequate political concepts which, after all, form the governing standards which must always control the technical advances of a civilization.

"With regard to the *schecormium* question: It is obvious that it is of great value to those extragalactic traders who have come so far to find it. Without doubt it plays an important part in their own military program, and, therefore, they would be quite willing to establish a program of aggression to insure continued supply of the material. Do you understand that?"

"No. We have analyzed the motives and purposes of our customers. We find them completely innocuous. We trust them."

"We must submit, then, our ultimatum in the matter," said Callimus with gravity. "We hereby formally demand, by virtue of our right as protectors of the System, that your extragalactic trade in *schecormium* cease. Convey this decision of the Security Committee to your people. If appeal is desired, you may present it in proper form."

Singhor looked at the stern faced circle of committeemen as if trying to comprehend the weird workings of their minds.

"I'm afraid we don't know the proper form," he said. "I'm quite sure that we don't."

When Singhor had left, Callimus looked at his fellow committeemen. His lean face was hard and his black eyes cold.

"We must not deceive ourselves," he said. "The gravity of this situation is extreme. The Medralians have probably brought to us the first intergalactic war in which we have engaged. These creatures who have been obtaining *schecormium* from Medral will not willingly see their supply cut off, yet our own national safety demands that we secure the available resources of this material to ourselves. There is no other alternative.

"We should have taken steps long ago to suppress the rebellious attitude of Medral. If we had done it when I first proposed that we do so, we would not be faced now with such a crisis. There cannot be excuse now for delaying action."

One by one, he looked into the faces

of the committeemen surrounding the table. He saw there only grave assent.

"Good," he said. "I am glad to see that we are agreed now—even though somewhat belatedly. It should be obvious by now to every thinking, politically mature individual that our System is not large enough to hold two races such as ours and that of Medral. Like an irresponsible child, Medral must be brought into line and shown that she cannot go on her way, ignoring the needs and welfare of the System, of the older and more competent races who would gladly display the necessary leadership in showing her the way to maturity.

"We must recommend that steps to declare war be initiated at once!"

As Reas Corper saw the first news dispatches on the conference come into the office, he thought of the dingy little shop on Horril Street where a tired and frustrated old man who had made a lifetime career of studying and teaching the methods of insuring peace between races had turned his back upon that vain dream in order to give greater and more glorious dreams to the children of Jemal. Reas wondered what Professor Theorn was thinking as he heard the belligerent and self-righteous announcement that Jemal's security was being threatened by the intergalactic trade in *schecormium* which Medral was inviting.

Theorn would recognize it for the war-inspiring propaganda that it was, perhaps shrug resignedly, and go back to his weird toys that were only for the eyes of childhood. Reas thought of those toys—what strange powers they had! If only they could be made available to every man so that the dreams of his childhood might come back again!

Theorn's failure was not his own, Reas thought. He remembered at the time of the professor's resignation the classes in Peace were almost unknown to the majority of the students at Curran's great university. It was not felt that the citizens of a great planet like Jemal, whose peoples had risen to might through their bloody struggles with each other, had need of knowledge in the ways of inspiring and preserving peace. The great military traditions of the unified nations of Jemal would speak for themselves. Theorn's classes, therefore, held only scant threes or fours of pupils when he decided to abandon his career.

Though there were a few in every city like Theorn and Reas who regarded the propaganda of Callimus for what it was, the majority of the populace were

incensed by the stories of Medral's obdurate stupidity.

It was well known that *schecormium* was wholly essential to the industrial and military life of the planets in the System. Most people had long believed that more rigid control over the deposits upon Medral should be provided, but only a token administrative guard had been provided. Now that the Medralians were undertaking to dispense the material to other creatures outside the System there was no excuse for not confiscating the deposits.

There had always been an almost subconscious feeling that the System was not large enough to hold both Medral and Jemal. No one knew just why it prevailed. Perhaps it was because so little was known of the Medralians. They offered only bare hospitality to visitors, and no invitations to return. They displayed no desire to co-operate, refused to take part in all treaty negotiations, yet offered freely for sale or trade the resources of their world that they had in surplus, and such artifacts as they chose to exhibit. Politically, their world was of such utter simplicity that it was incomprehensible to Jemal. There was literally no central government. The acts of every man seemed completely in accord with some unwritten, unspoken code of rules which seemed to be comprehended and rigorously observed from the moment of birth.

It was somehow alien, unhealthy, and disturbing to the Jamalians, whose own record of blood and conflict in the establishment of strong unification and central government was very long indeed.

So it was perhaps this feeling of utter political alienness, between two races so biologically similar, that inspired the sense of inevitability concerning the conflict that all Jemal knew would break soon.

In the living room of his mansion Callimus heard the news of the public reaction with satisfaction. He knew the belligerence index of Jemal to Medral was high enough that a relatively small amount of propaganda would suffice to assure popular support of the war upon Medral.

Derrold, the son of Callimus, was in the opposite end of the room with the silvered Imaginos spread out in meaningless configurations on top of a table. He was apparently paying no attention to the words of the news speaker, but he could not help hearing the ominous message. He continued, however, in the silent abstraction of his regard of the Imaginos.

Callimus watched, puzzled, dismayed, and just a little frightened. He'd had great dreams for his son, but Derrold inclined to fulfill few of them. Callimus had dreamed of him as a great military and political leader, but Derrold was becoming a poet and a dreamer like his mother.

The set of toys bought from the Toy-maker were stupid and absurd things, Callimus thought. For hours Derrold sat immobile, staring at the clumsy figurines, dreaming over them. Callimus wondered what strange thoughts were passing through the boy's mind, but it was as if he were behind a closed door through which Callimus could not enter.

Derrold should be taking an interest in the affairs of government. He was not too young to be showing some comprehension of such matters, yet he seemed to be aware of nothing now but the dream world in which he moved.

Callimus moved towards the other end of the room and sat down by the table. "Did you know that there is about to be a war between our world and Medral, Derrold? We are being forced to fight for our security and liberty."

"I heard the news. I guessed what it meant."

"You have a wonderful opportunity to make a study of this situation and the ways in which we shall destroy the menace of Medral. It will be of great value to you when you enter upon your military schooling next year."

Derrold suddenly flung his head down against his arms on the table and burst into tears. "What do I care for all of that? My friend is dead! My friends fought with each other and Rane is dead!"

"What in the world are you talking about?" Callimus demanded. "Who is Rane?"

In wild, hysterical anger Derrold raised his head and pointed towards one of the inanimate figurines. "He's there . . . and you can't even see him! Boro"—he pointed to another of the images—"killed him!"

"Of all the insane nonsense!" Callimus flung his arm out and swept the Imaginos to the floor. He shook Derrold by the arm and shoved him roughly towards the stairway.

"Go up to bed and forget this foolishness! Tomorrow we'll make arrangements for your transfer to military at once. That should straighten out some of these quirks in your brain."

Sobbing, the boy lunged half blindly towards the stairway and climbed to his

room. Callimus remained at the table. Little white spots appeared on his cheeks from the fury of his anger. His eyes finally came to rest upon the vision of the scattered Imaginos lying upon the thick carpet. Savagely, he jabbed towards one with his heel and ground the fragile thing into white powder. There would be no more nonsense about those things. He wondered if he should have the Toy-maker arrested and investigated. There was no telling what kind of harm these toys might do to young minds. Yet there really couldn't be anything to the toys. It was all the children's imagination, which was being overactivated by the suggestions of the Toymaker.

Nearby, Theis, his wife and the mother of Derrold, half rose from her chair in silent protest, then sank back before the white fury that lay upon her husband's face. She could not see Derrold sent to the military school yet without struggling for at least another year of freedom for him, but now was not the time.

Callimus moved to an adjacent alcove where dozens of lines and private communication channels were available to obtain reports from all over the planet. He sat down and began manipulating the buttons, calling the government observation posts for an estimate of the effectiveness of their first step in the propaganda campaign.

The screen lighted as he contacted the first observer.

"Index of antagonism with respect to Medral, please."

The operator scanned an index machine and looked up. "It's four point six—up from two point four."

"Thank you."

The image disappeared and was replaced.

"Five point one."

Another. "Three point eight."

"Six point nine."

One by one they came in, critical indexes varying by city areas and the social and economic conditions of their inhabitants, but every section showed a rise—a substantial rise, one that would permit a direct declaration of war against Medral within days, Callimus told himself confidently.

The people wanted war. They should have war, and the man who fought hardest to bring it about and insure the quick destruction of their incompatible neighbors would surely be the next president—Callimus himself.

He switched off and returned to the living room. "The reaction is fine," he

said to Theis. "We shall be able to declare war within four or five days at the most."

"Why?" she said softly. "Why must war be declared? Is there no way that peace can be maintained? Is there no way that we can live peacefully with Medral?"

He laughed pleasantly now as he took her arm and led her toward the stairs. "Don't try to worry your head about such details of politics, my beautiful Theis. You never did comprehend such complex things. I love you for it—but our son must not be like you in those things. You heard my decision that he must be sent away to the military. I hope you will not interfere with my plans for him. I have thought in times past that you objected to my programs for him, there must be no interference in this."

"Of course not. Haven't I always trusted your judgment?"

"Not always, I'm afraid, my dear."

It was sometime in the middle of the night—he didn't know just when. He awoke with a sharp and sudden sense of loss, or perhaps it might have been a noise somewhere in the well-guarded house. He didn't know what impulse possessed him, but he rose from his bed and slipped quietly through the darkened hall and down the stairs.

As he approached the living room there was an almost overpowering sense of something alien within the room. He had no idea what it might be but it was like the emanation from some tired, frenzied, and frantic mind made tangible to his senses.

In sudden anger at his imagination, he snapped the lights on, flooding the room with soft glow.

There, before him at the table where he had sat earlier, was Derrold. On the table were the Imaginos, arranged as previously.

The boy sat staring as if seeing some vision far beyond the ability of Callimus and other men to witness. *And he had been sitting that way in the darkness before the lights came on.*

"Derrold!" Callimus advanced slowly, ominous anger in his voice. "What are you doing out of bed? I forbade you ever to have those things again. You have disobeyed me!"

His arm raised suddenly, whether to strike or to sweep away the game pieces again, Derrold never knew. But, as he dodged, the voice of his mother sounded sharply from the foot of the stairs.

"Call! Don't you dare strike that boy!"

Derrold looked up at the sound of her voice, as if coming out of a trance. It was the first time in his life that he had ever

heard her raise her voice in anger to his father, but now she came towards them defiantly and in rage at Callimus' threat.

"You leave him alone," she said quietly, and somehow, Callimus shrank and his anger waned before her quiet demand. "There's something wrong here—something terribly wrong."

She turned to her son. "What is it, Derrold?"

"They're beginning to fight now," he said dully. "My friends have divided up into two nations and now they are preparing for a great war. Already they have killed many. Rane and Boro were the greatest men and two of my best friends. I've begged Boro to stop the conflict, and I asked him why he killed Rane. He said Rane would have killed him if he hadn't. He says that nothing can stop the battles, except us."

"Except us? What does he mean?" Theis asked gently.

"Us! All of us. He says that unless we stop our fighting they will have to go on until they destroy each other. There's nothing else that can prevent their war."

"You mean that if Jemal and Medral became peaceful that your little friends would end their war?"

"Yes! Why must the war be fought? Can't some way be found to avoid it? Then my friends, the Sackes and the Brams would not fight."

Theis looked at her son tenderly, sympathy filling her at the sight of his agonized, tear-stained face. "Not tonight, anyway," she said. "Nothing can be done tonight. Go up to bed now. Tomorrow we will see what is to be done."

Slowly, with a last despairing glance at the crude figurines, Derrold rose and moved up the stairway.

When he was gone, Theis slumped into a chair. "I don't understand the great affairs of war and politics," she said bitterly, "but I understand what they have done to our son."

"It's these infernal Imaginos," Callimus said fiercely. He picked one up and crushed it in his hand. "I'll have that Toymaker arrested and thrown in jail for the rest of his life for this!"

"What's that got to do with it? Are you going to blame these harmless toys for the delusions and mental breakdown your own ambitions have brought to Derrold? Surely you haven't lost all your reason. The boy is sick. We've got to get him to a psychiatrist as soon as possible in the morning. These fears will destroy him if they aren't removed."

Uncertainly, Callimus looked at the

silvered fragments in his hand and watched them drop to the floor in a shower of white dust. There was something here that he knew he must fight, but it was an opponent that couldn't be seen or identified, and that brought a maddening frustration to Callimus.

With the return of daylight, Callimus felt as if he had been through a sleepless period of nightmares—but nothing more than nightmares.

The fears and mental aberrations of his son Derrold seemed remote and of not very great consequence. He knew that children frequently suffered such delusions. He grew quite cheerful as he left for the Capitol.

He said to Theis, "Call me as soon as the doctor has given his report. I'm sure he'll find a quick remedy. We'll do whatever he finds necessary. Derrold is sure to be able to enter the military on time."

Theis said nothing, but merely nodded acquiescence to his request. As his car moved silently away through the luxurious gardens of the estate, Theis had a fleeting thought, a moment of wondering just which one was living in a world of illusion. How was it possible for a man to be cheerful on a morning when he was moving to tear down the world?

Up to now, the token guards at the *schecormium* pits on Medral had been instructed to make no attempt to prevent the loading of the extragalactic ships of Medral's customers. Now, as he returned to the office, Callimus sent out an order to the guards to resist the loading of the next vessel. He suspected that it would mean the instant annihilation of the few guards, but that was the point. Such a massacre would be the next incident in his campaign. It might of itself be sufficient for a flat declaration against Medral.

Circumstances were fortuitous for his plans.

The captain of the guards, to whom Callimus spoke over the secret diplomatic channels, was doubtful.

"There's a one hundred thousand ton freighter preparing to land for a shipment right now. I don't know just what force either the Medralians or the Calorx will show if we order the loading stopped. We have little resources available to put up a fight."

"We know that," said Callimus. "Nevertheless, the Security Committee has ruled that shipments of *schecormium* outside our System must be halted at once. Forbid the loading in the name

of the Security Committee. If your forces are insufficient, it will not be a decisive matter, but reinforcements will be sent. The Medralian government has received our demands that shipments cease. You are to enforce these demands at once."

The captain of the guards looked at Callimus for a long moment with set lips and bleak eyes. He knew that Callimus had deliberately and impersonally sentenced himself and his fellow guards to death for the sake of political stratagem.

He said, "We'll do our best, sir," and waited for Callimus to break off.

The early news reports carried word of the resistance that was to be made. From the observers throughout Curran City and other great metropolitan centers of the planet came word of the passionate excitement that reigned as the news went out. Every citizen of Jemal knew what it meant—knew that if Medral opposed the guards it would be the duty of Jemal to declare war at once to preserve her own honor and security.

Reas Corper covered the story as the dispatches came out of the official capitol news dispensary. He digested the reports and wrote his commentary. There was little to write that was not known by every citizen already. Everyone knew that the tense situation was building up to certain war. He wondered almost why Callimus was stalling around, why he didn't go ahead and start it. Surely the index of antagonism was high enough by now.

He wrote the story mechanically and fed it to the wires. He wondered about going down to the little toyshop of Rold Theorn. Somehow, he felt that a talk with the disillusioned peacemaker would do him good. An interview and commentary since active baiting of Medral had begun ought to make a good story, yet his previous interview had not been written up even. Somehow it seemed to Reas that the use of the old professor's name would be sacrilege in times like the present. Mention of his name would bring only hisses in a world so geared to offensive preparations. He decided to let the story go—but he felt like seeing Theorn and the simple little toyshop again.

He wondered if there were perhaps others like himself—and Theorn—who regarded the approaching conflict with dread and a fervent wish that somehow it would be averted. He didn't know; he knew only that such thoughts were near treason.

He was about to leave his desk when a call came abruptly from his home. It was Eolana, his wife. Her frantic voice was hardly intelligible.

"It's Borren," she cried. "He's ill. I've called the doctor and he says our son must have psychiatric treatment at once. Reas, can you come home? I don't know what to do."

Reas Corper stared at her frenzied face. The thought of injury or illness to Borren, their only son, made him sick within himself. Why, Borren had always been in perfect health since he was an infant. Nothing could be seriously wrong—not to his mind!

"I'll be right home," said Reas. "Better call the psychiatrist to find out what's wrong. How does Borren act?"

"He has hysterical illusions about these stupid toys, the Imaginos. He thinks they're alive and real, and he's frantic because he thinks they're fighting each other. He was so hysterical I had to put him to bed. Please hurry home. I can't stop his crying."

She cut off and Reas continued to stare at the gray plate.

The Imaginos!

Reas Corper's mind was suddenly swarming with confusion. What did the toys of Rold Theorn have to do with this? Borren thought they were real. Eolana had said, but there was nothing unusual in that. That was the way the Imaginos were supposed to work. There was nothing wrong with that. Or was there? Reas remembered the times when he had stared at the silly little figurines with their stupid dough faces while Borren had described the fantastic adventures he saw. Was it entirely healthy in spite of Rold Theorn's assurances? What created the illusions that all the children vowed were real?

He didn't know. He just didn't know what to do about anything, he thought, as he hurried from the news building. The world was collapsing about people's heads and they were welcoming the destruction with ecstatic joy. The news of the order to the guards on Medral had reached the street and the reaction was almost hysteric. It sickened him. This was happening, and in his own house disaster equally furious had struck. But there would be a cure, he told himself. Borren would be all right. He had to be. There would be nothing for Reas and Eolana to live for if anything happened to the child.

Alone in his office high up in the massive block of the capitol building, Calli-

mus waited impatiently, scanning the reports from the observers. He noted the index was already up to an average of six and four tenths. As soon as it reached seven and three it would be adequate for a war declaration. Callimus knew that without doubt it would reach that point when the guards were killed for their intervention in the loading of the alien ship.

But, as he waited and the afternoon waned forecasting the coming of night, his mind kept swinging back to the incidents of the previous night and somehow he dreaded the outcome of the examination which his son, Derrold, must have undergone by now. Why hadn't Theis called? Waiting for the observers' reports was nerve racking enough without having to wait for a report on the affairs of his household.

He called Theis. She answered almost at once. Here eyes were dry but showed the obvious signs of recent tears.

"Did you have the psychiatrist?" Callimus demanded. "What is the trouble?"

"The doctor was here," Theis answered. "He was not quite sure what the exact trouble is, but he feels sure of the cause."

"Why didn't you call me as soon as you knew? What is the cause?"

"I was afraid your great affairs of State could not be interrupted when it is merely a question of your son's health—and that of hundreds of other sons."

"Theis! You're talking nonsense! What is it all about? I haven't—"

"—time to waste? No, of course you haven't time to waste. You are so busy getting the world ready for death. The trouble with your son, if you must know, is simply hysteria brought on by the imminence of war. And Derrold is not alone in suffering from the destruction you have begun. The doctor says that several hundred similar cases have developed in Curran City in the last day in children under twelve. It seems they have been taught so effectively the meaning of war and the certainty of their participation in it that their minds have simply cracked under the strain of the present situation. The world of illusion into which they have sought escape has proved to be a trap for them. I suggested removing the Imaginos, but the doctor said to let them remain as an outlet which might prove healthy in the end. Proper analyses have not been made, but the cases are almost sure psychoses in most instances. Many of them can

never be cured, perhaps. That is what you have accomplished thus far for Jemal!"

Only for an instant was Callimus taken aback by her outburst. He had never been accustomed to taking the opinion of the beautiful Theis as any basis for serious action, and this was certainly not the time to begin.

"There must be another answer, Theis. You are becoming hysterical yourself. We'll have the best psychiatrists on Jemal and find the right answer to this thing. But take those idiotic Imaginos away from Derrold. Somehow, I suspect that they are more than a little responsible for all of this."

"The doctor insisted it would be dangerous at this stage. He made it very definite that we should not do that until he gave us instructions to do so."

"I say take them away from him!"

Theis looked at him a moment with expressionless eyes, then abruptly cut off. Startled, Callimus tried to call back but she refused to answer.

He swore fervently to himself. What was going wrong with things all of a sudden? Theis had always been almost docile, constantly agreeable to his every suggestion. Now she was becoming almost shrewish. He cursed the fates and circumstances that had brought these difficulties just as the Security Committee was preparing the planet for its war of destiny.

And there was that other, highly disturbing aspect of the matter. Several hundred other similar cases, Theis had said, and the fool doctors were blaming it on the war tension. If that kept up, the people's fervor would relax. He'd have to have the doctors warned to keep their diagnoses to themselves if such cases kept recurring.

It was almost dusk when the door opened suddenly and a visitor was announced. Callimus stared as the man entered his office. It was the captain of the guards with whom he had spoken that morning.

"How did you get here?" Callimus demanded. "Didn't you carry out my orders?"

"We attempted it according to your instructions, sir. As I suggested, however, our forces were insufficient. We were not harmed. We were simply taken prisoner and brought to Jemal. I was to give you the message that the guard will no longer be tolerated upon Medral, but that your orders for *schecormium* will be filled in any desired amounts as in the past. The same goes for all other customers."

Callimus frowned. He had been sure of much more violent action than this. This event would have a much lower index value than the killing of the guards would have had, but perhaps it would be adequate.

"Very well," Callimus dismissed the guard abruptly. "You did your best under the circumstances. That will be all."

The captain bowed out, and Callimus was left alone. Immediately he called the government news room. "Special dispatch to prepare for all casters," he said. He then gave the facts of the Medralian ousting of the Security guards. "Give it the highest possible belligerence index, and issue in verbatim status only."

This would milk the incident for all possible advantage. The writers in the dispatch room would put the story together using words of the highest possible semantic content of belligerency. By morning he would know the answer, whether the total index of the planet's populace was great enough for a war declaration.

He answered calls, signed papers, and made other decisions, and gradually the day's business came to an end. The darkness of early winter night impregnated the city, and seemed to flow through the cells of his own mind.

He dreaded to meet the thing that had come into his own house, his child with a sick mind. Theis grown so suddenly bitter and accusing. While he schemed and struggled for the glory and greatness of Jemal it seemed as if his own personal world were falling apart. His dreams for Derrold had been great ones, dreams of might and leadership, but he knew within himself when he ceased evading the truth, that the boy had neither the form nor the soul for political or military might. Perhaps a poet or a scientist, but nothing more.

Callimus went out into the dreary city night where cold winds and fog wraiths battled for furious mastery.

When he reached home it was as if the essence of the bitter night were congealed in the atmosphere of the house. Lights burned at scattered intervals throughout the rooms, but only the maid approached as he called.

"Your wife is in Master Derrold's bedroom," she said. "They have both been in there all afternoon and I have heard them crying for hours, but they refuse to answer or to open when I knock. I'm afraid for them—"

Callimus flung away his hat and cloak and hurried up the stairs. Even as he reached the upper hall he could hear the muffled sounds coming from behind the

closed door of Derrold's room. He rushed towards it and flung it open.

Lying under the covers, one arm over his face, was Derrold. Theis was huddled face down across the lower corner of the bed.

Between them lay the insensate forms of the Imaginos!

The sight of those objects struck the fuel of rage in his mind into a flaming inferno. He swept the figurines to the floor and stamped upon one until there was only the white dust of the inert material spotting the carpet.

But with his first motion, Theis uttered a scream of rage and defiance. "Don't you dare destroy them, you—madman!"

She rose up from the bed and faced him with such an expression in her eyes that he shrank away from her.

"Theis," he said quietly at last, "have you gone insane, too?"

"Insane?" Her short laugh was harsh. "You talk about us and insanity—and you destroy the Imaginos!"

"So they've got you, too! I was right. There is something about those hellish things that has made Derrold—and you—this way, and I'm going to find what it is if I have to scour the planet for the secret of it."

"You would not say that if you had seen them alive and struggling and killing each other—because of us, because of you. They're real, they're alive, but they can only be seen by the eyes of those who are willing to believe. Derrold showed me the way to believe in them, and this afternoon I saw for the first time what he had been seeing. I saw them fighting and killing each other, destroying their wonderful cities and towns—and I heard them calling and pleading for us to build peace that they might once again live in happiness together."

"Who was the psychiatrist you had here today? I want to talk to him—about Derrold."

"Dr. Tarro. I wish you would bring him here. Perhaps it would help bring you to your senses."

Suddenly Derrold threw back his arm and looked at Callimus as if aware of his presence for the first time. "Will there be peace, Father? We must have peace. My friends want us to not fight so that they can be friends with each other again."

"You don't understand these things, Derrold," said Callimus with surprising tenderness. "We'll find a way to make things right for your friends."

He left and went downstairs to call Dr. Tarro. The psychiatrist promised to

come over at once in view of Theis' sudden aberrations. He refused to comment or give any opinion until he arrived.

As he broke the connection and Callimus was once more alone, the silence closed in tightly about him and he had the urgent desire to fight it off like some smothering cloak.

Then he remembered the observers' reports. There should be something available by now. He called the central reporting station.

"Senator Callimus," he said. "The belligerency index Jemal to Medral, please."

"The over-all average is now five point eight. The individual—"

"Five eight!" Callimus exploded. "There must be some mistake. This morning it was six four. Check your figures again!"

"I'll do that. It is a mathematical impossibility, however, for there to be any error in the methods we use."

Callimus knew that. As he hung up he thought, there is no error. Some new factor had completely neutralized the effect of the Medralian expulsion of the Security guards and even lowered the index from its previous value. With a receding index it would be disastrous to begin an offensive.

What new factor had been introduced?

It seemed incredible that something powerful enough to lower the index that much could have appeared and come into play without his awareness of it.

He was still pondering the problem when the annunciator indicated the arrival of Dr. Tarro.

The psychiatrist looked haggard. "May I see the patients?" he asked at once. "I have very little time."

"I want to talk to you a moment," said Callimus. "You saw my son, Derrold, this morning, but I didn't hear your diagnosis except what my wife had to tell, and she was not very rational. Now, since I have come home, I have found her in the same state as my son. They both have the delusions about the reality of those stupid toys, the Imaginos. My wife repeats the story of their pleading for peace so that they can stop fighting. What is the cause of such illusions?"

The psychiatrist looked at him from beneath deep brows, as if not quite daring to speak his mind. "Hysteria," he said at last. "War hysteria brought on by the tension of the present political situation. For years we have lived in dread of what an interplanetary war would

mean, yet we have known it was coming. Now, the present slow buildup to war potential is the force sufficient to crack the last restraints against escape into illusion. Since the beginning of the recent crop of incidents there have been over four thousand similar cases among the children of Curran City. Reports from other places indicate similar conditions. It appears to be the children who are suffering most."

Four thousand, Callimus thought. Here was the factor he had overlooked. This was the cause of the changed belligerency index. Four thousand families whose children were stricken with hysteria and pleading for peace!

"Do all these children have sets of the Imaginos?" Callimus demanded.

Dr. Tarro shrugged. "What child in Curran City doesn't have one of them? There is probably one in three fourths of the homes on the planet."

"I think they are responsible for this trouble. There's something wholly malicious and unfathomable about those things."

"No—only indirectly. They might be likened perhaps to the objects used to obtain concentration in some methods of hypnotism, but I've examined the Imaginos before, merely out of curiosity. There's absolutely nothing there but inert masses that appear to be some sort of plaster composition.

"No. This whole thing is a result of the war fears in people's minds. It is only coincidental, I am sure, that the children have linked it with the Imaginos. Since it is the case, however, I am letting them keep the toys. To remove them and attempt to suppress the symptoms would be worse than letting them run their course for a time. Only by keeping all factors present can proper therapy be worked out."

"You say it is only the children who have been affected, but I told you of my wife's exception to that."

"That may enable us to throw some more light on the methods of therapy we shall be able to use, provided she is able to make any intelligent effort to assist us."

"I am afraid she is not able to do that," said Callimus.

They mounted the stairs and moved towards the room where Theis and Derrold remained. There were no tears now, only a sullen, desperate resignation upon the faces of the two.

Dr. Tarro sat down and spoke kindly. At first Callimus listened intently to the questions and to the answers given by

Theis and Derrold. But there was nothing new, only the same desperate story that Callimus already knew.

As he sat there he watched the tense face of Theis, his wife. He remembered how it had been when he first loved her long ago for her poetic, ingenuous nature and her quiet beauty. For so many years now he seemed to have forgotten that first magic, and she had merely lived in his house and been the mother of his son while he went his lone way dreaming of great victories in the world of politics and government that would bring power and fame to Jemal and to himself and to his son.

But Theis had not gone along with him. She had remained merely the beautiful, the poetic Theis. He had been forced to choose, and the choice of his governmental career had been a wise one, of course, for it represented all that was truly important to a man. But he wondered now why he couldn't have had both instead of only one of the alternatives.

Suddenly he realized that Dr. Tarro was leaving. Nothing had been accomplished. These men of science were witless in an emergency, he thought. The city, the entire planet was being swerved from its course of destiny by these illusions of its children, and the psychiatrists could do nothing but ask meaningless questions. Callimus was suddenly irritated to the point where he could hardly endure the lingering, patronizing final admonitions and reassurances of the psychiatrist.

When he finally said goodnight to the doctor it was not late, but he decided to go to bed. He felt exhausted by the tensions of the day, and there were many more such days to follow. He had come to no conclusion as to what policy the Security Committee should adopt in the present crisis. Something would have to be done to overcome the effects of this hysteria, but what it would be he did not know.

When he entered their room, Theis was there—and she had on the night table beside the bed the Imaginos. Their ugly, misshapen forms glowed ghoulishly under the dim light of the room.

In sudden, unexpected tenderness brought on perhaps by his earlier mood, Callimus moved towards the bed and sat down. "Tell me what you see there," he said softly.

"I see two peoples who once were one," she said, her eyes trance-like. "I see homes where fear reigns and men are torn from their work and their families

in mad preparations for a war whose cause they do not understand. I see them looking up to me, pleading and begging for peace among us so that this terrible war among them may cease. Look closely, believe that they are there—and you may see it, too.”

Something of the emotions he had once felt for her stirred within him and put his mind in old, forgotten rapport with hers. He looked in the direction of her fixed, staring gaze.

And he saw!

Like a mist rising out of immeasurable depths, a swirling grayness was about the inanimate shapes. Rapidly, it faded, and where it cleared, the lifeless blobs were no longer. In their place were tiny, living, moving figures amid the splendors of a great fantastic city.

And suddenly, as if diving from great heights, he was in their midst. He heard their voices and understood the words they spoke. Words and voices filled him with fear and despair. Abruptly, the figures seemed to be aware of him. Their eyes turned towards him in pleading. They spoke directly to him, a confusion of many voices raised in a plea for peace, which only he could grant.

It was a world filled with mad despair, an illusory, unreal world, yet one which could persist in waking hours like a terrible nightmare.

Instantly, with this thought, the scene vanished and he was looking upon Theis and the silver Imaginos again. The room was stifling hot and sweat was on his forehead. His hands trembled ever so slightly.

“You saw them, and you heard?” Theis said.

He nodded. “I saw. I’m going to visit someone whom I’d forgotten I must see. I’ll be back shortly. Don’t wait for me.”

He hurried from the bedroom and raced downstairs. He had the answer to it all now. That moment’s shuddering impact when he had glimpsed the illusions of Theis’ mind had shown him why Jemal’s index had gone down.

Somehow, someone was deliberately trying to prevent the outbreak of war. Perhaps even the Medralians themselves. The Imaginos could be controlled by electro-magnetic radiation in some manner to inspire fear of war and control the minds of those upon whom they operated. He wondered just how many of the hellish devices had been distributed throughout the planet. There could be hundreds of thousands. It would take months to confiscate them all and destroy their enervating power. But perhaps that

would not be necessary. It might be sufficient to destroy only the control centers. He didn’t understand about things like that, but there were plenty of scientists in the government service who did.

He put in a call to the government library information bureau. The round-the-clock service could give him the lead he needed.

“I want the available information on the ownership and distribution of the toys known as Imaginos and sold in Curran City by the toyshop of Horril Street which is presided over by a person known only as the Toymaker.”

“Thank you. Will you wait? The information will be ready within five minutes.”

“I’ll wait.”

The Toymaker hadn’t looked as if he were capable of engaging in such intrigue and counterplotting, Callimus thought. But that made him all the more valuable as an agent of whatever powers were behind him. It seemed strange that the government police had not discovered his activities.

The clerk returned abruptly. “The Toyshop,” she said, “is owned and operated solely by a Professor Rold Theorn, ex-holder of the Chair of Peace at Curran University. He has associated with him a Dr. Derl, formerly of the Physics Department at Curran University, and a Dr. Tarro, psychiatrist. That is all the controlling interest seems to consist of.”

“Tarro!” Callimus gasped. “The Dr. Tarro who is now in charge of government psychiatry here in Curran City?”

The clerk frowned. “Yes, yes—there is only one Dr. Tarro, Psychiatrist. It is the same man.”

“Thank you—that is all,” said Callimus.

He sat there for a moment trying to piece together this new factor with the rest of the slowly appearing pattern. So Tarro was one of them. That meant that no serious attempt was being made to cure the thousands of neurotic and psychotic cases that had appeared. Since Tarro was in charge of the government controlled psychiatric clinic, what he said and did was the law in his domain.

It meant, too, that there was undoubtedly adequate help available somewhere for Derrold and Theis, but that could wait for the moment. He had a visit to make.

Outside, the fog had won over the wind that had been blowing earlier. Now it swirled in ghostly shapes, closing in behind Callimus in his wake as he passed

through it to enter his car. He decided to drive alone rather than have the chauffeur take him. He checked a pair of guns in the car and slipped them into his coat pockets. He could take care of himself in any difficulty with two old professors, he was certain. Tarro would be out on his rounds yet, no doubt.

The streets of the city were subdued in the shrouding mist. Seldom did such fog settle upon Curran City. Favorable air currents kept it away most of the time so it was a particularly depressing night for such a move as he was about to make.

He drove past Horril Street without recognizing the insignificant alley, and was forced to turn around and come back to it. The street was entirely deserted as he drove along it, the lights cutting through the grayness with orange-red flames.

He came at last to the darkened Toyshop. There was nothing of the gaiety that filled it in the daytime when ingenuous children flocked about the shelves and counters, letting their minds come within range of the hellish Imaginos, carrying away the control devices that would inspire dreams of terror and destruction in minds meant to stand fearless before all disaster. Callimus almost had to admire the fiendish ingenuity of the plot to destroy the military power of Jemal by enervating the minds of its youth.

He stopped close to the darkened windows of the Toyshop, peering in vain for activity within. There was, however, a crack of light from far back showing that someone was in the back rooms of the store. He had expected that. There would be much work after dark for such men as these.

Abruptly the door opened in his face. Metal glistered for a moment in the moist air. A voice came out of the darkness.

"Come in, Senator. We expected you would come tonight."

"Dr. Tarro!"

"Yes. Please don't try to pull out that gun, Senator. I have been waiting here in the dark for some time. I can see much better than you can."

"Tarro—what does this mean?"

"I'm not quite sure—not quite sure at all, but I wish I were. Come in and shut the door behind you. That's fine. Move towards the rear of the shop there where the light is shining beneath the door."

Callimus moved as quickly as possible. It was disturbing that they had gotten the upper hand for the moment. It was quite stupid of him, he reflected, not to

have brought the government police in on this, but he felt no qualms over the possibility of their killing him. It was difficult to accomplish the murder of one such as he in Curran City and escape, and he was quite sure that they would not risk their involved plans to commit murder.

He reached the door and kicked it open. There were three other men in the unimpressive room. Beyond, through another open door, he could see equipment that looked as if the place might be a small laboratory.

Callimus dominated the room with his stance. He faced Rold Theorn. "So you're the great peacemaker!"

"Yes, I believe that so far we have succeeded," said Theorn quietly. "We have successfully blocked the rise of the index. I believe that we shall continue to drive it on down—or would have."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that the situation has been quite distinctly reversed. Medral, not Jemal, has become the aggressor. Now, instead of concerning ourselves only with Jemal, we must use every resource to establish harmonious relations with Medral before an outbreak occurs."

"What absurd nonsense are you talking about?"

"Please sit down. Allow me to present these other gentlemen, Senator Callimus. This is Dr. Derl, recently Professor of Physics at Curran. This is Mr. Reas Corper, newsman, who has become vitally interested in our cause, and whom we have to thank for our present information concerning Medral's intentions. Dr. Derl will tell you why we must pacify the Medralians at once."

Derl was not talkative. "It's simple. They'll wipe us out with the first blow. They're so far ahead of us that it's pitiful. We're fumbling children beside them. Of course, there will still be enough left of us to strike back—enough to make the whole thing virtually suicide for us both, but it's definitely that: suicide for both worlds."

"We've found out some special information just tonight," said Reas Corper. "They aren't going to wait for us to attack first. Since we've shown such warlike intentions, they are going to hit us a surprise blow in the next day and a half. That's why you have so little time."

Callimus looked at them as if unable to believe his ears were recording correctly. Then, suddenly, he threw back his head and emitted a roar of laughter.

"What fine melodrama!" he exclaimed.

"You men planning the destiny of a planet here in this dingy back room of a toyshop. It's wonderful—as melodrama."

"You are forgetting the Imaginos that have gone out of this despised shop to all parts of the planet," said Theorn. "I think you know their power. Do you know how many have been distributed? We have quite complete manufacturing facilities and branch agencies. We've placed over fifteen million of them. That means fifteen million families whose children are hysterically begging for peace. Do you think the parents of those families are going to willingly give you your war? They are more than enough to keep the index forever below the critical level."

Callimus stared at him in unbelief. "Fifteen million—!"

Theorn nodded. "Quite an effective number, I'm sure you'll agree—since you've seen the results in your own household."

"Yes—it was the Imaginos I came here to see about. I have seen their results—and I'm sure you are quite aware of what will happen to the men responsible for this thing. The least you can do to lessen the consequences is to turn off the Imaginos at once."

"Turn them off?" Theorn looked puzzled. "No—you are the only one who can turn them off. That is what we wanted to see you about. When you questioned Tarro about them tonight we knew that you would come. Their effect will go on until you wipe out the war tension and fears that you have created. Until then, the children of fifteen million families are going to plead incessantly for peace. And their parents are going to demand peace in order to end this hysteria even if you and all your kind are destroyed in the process."

"Look what you've done to us! History shows that Jemal and Medral are the same age approximately, yet scientifically and culturally they are a hundred generations ahead of us, all because of our incessant wars, our repeated backslidings after attaining some modicum of advanced culture."

"The wars in Medralian history are hundreds of generations apart while one major conflict almost every generation or two has sapped our own resources. Now we propose to step out and conquer the Medralians to 'protect' our system."

"The Medralians know the consequences of such a conflict better than we do. For a long time they have hoped

that it might be avoided. They are convinced now that it is not. Their only hope of even fragmentary survival is to strike quickly and annihilate us before we can hit back. They knew the futility of such a hope. They are aware that we have protective defenses which can enable us to survive and strike back with great force even though they take the initiative."

"They know that the war will be suicide for both worlds."

"That is ridiculous!" said Callimus. "We shall crush them until not a stone—"

"Save the oratory for your next campaign—which you will probably not live to conduct," said Reas.

"There are differences between us and the Medralians," said Theorn. "Differences which, in some respects, make it very difficult for social and economic intercourse to exist between the two worlds. Fortunately, we are two different worlds and have the blessing of considerable distance between us. But there must be some degree of interchange. You have said that there is not room enough in the System for the two of us. I say there must be room for both of us or there shall be room for neither. Both or neither—that is the choice we have to make."

Callimus seemed quieted by the words, but it was a deadly calm. "What you have said, what you have done in distributing the Imaginos amounts to the highest treason against your world. Regardless of what happens to me, you know what the penalties against you shall be."

"The psychology of the warmaker is a tragic one," said Theorn sadly, "but it leaves him always with a single, terribly vulnerable spot. It is upon this weakness that the Imaginos play and have their advantage."

"The warmaker always visions himself in his own mind as the mighty conqueror, trampling down his enemies and their works. He boasts and shouts of his might and thunders defiance. Never once is mentioned the possibility of utter personal defeat. But it is there. Every warmaker knows it. Beneath all the outward blast and cry there is the deeply buried vision of himself as the vanquished, a fearful vision that is seldom brought to the front of consciousness. The shouting and the boasting are allowed to smother it."

"But upon that deep fear of the personal consequences of war have I based

my hopes for peace. Physicist Derl is responsible for the materials of which the Imaginos are made—he and Dr. Tarro collaborated in the technique of their use.

"This material is capable of selecting and reflecting with amplified power the various weak radiative thoughts of the mind. Telepathy is a known but impractical art among us because of the weakness of such transmissions. The material of the Imaginos has power to emanate such mind activating radiations for a long period of time after having the proper stimuli recorded on it, so to speak. The material can also be formed so as to respond to certain selected impulses of nearby minds.

"Thus, you can see how the Imaginos worked. We distributed this material in the form of shapeless, grotesque images because the scoffing and ridicule of adult minds served to close those minds to the radiations. Otherwise, there would have been too much investigation of the mechanism of the Imaginos. Children's minds, however, had no idea of ridicule or investigation. They responded readily, therefore, to the recorded impressions and so the Imaginos became playthings, revealing fantastic adventures which we had recorded there.

"After a time, however, the recordings became fainter and the stimulus to which the material responded most forcefully became predominant—the stimulus of fear.

"The fear was already there in the mind of every child approaching adolescence. They have heard their parents talk of the impending war. They have heard the news stories, and your deliberate propaganda. They knew what it meant, and their sensitive minds were filled with apprehension and dread, which were magnified a thousand fold every time they played with their Imaginos. Simultaneously, there came into play a secondary impression recorded upon the figurines—a plea for peace from the imagined characters who were at conflict with each other. It was a plea that only peace among the adult world of Jemal could enable the fanciful creatures of the Imagino world to cease their conflict.

"There you have it—millions of families in which your propaganda was being counteracted by the pleas of frightened children who demanded peace of the adult world—perhaps a harsh remedy, but far less so than the war you would have them endure. Their condition

is easily recognizable as war inspired hysteria by any competent psychiatrist. Soon the information would have swept the planet that the only cure for this epidemic of hysteria among the children was the assurance of peace. The children, their parents, the psychiatrists, all would have deluged the government with demands for peace. All your propaganda would have been swept aside."

"If you were so confident of all this," sneered Callimus, "why are you taking time to tell me all about it? Why do you say 'would have' instead of 'will'?"

"Because we have failed," said Theorn. "Because we are too late."

"What do you mean?"

"We have told you. Medral has already completed her war plans. She is ready to attack at any moment. That was learned by one of the newsmen accidentally. Reas Corper obtained the information and came to us at once."

"So you lose, after all."

"No, through you we may yet win—unless it is already so late that no power can stop the suicidal forces you have set in motion."

"Through me!"

"Yes. Because you have the greatest stake from the standpoint of imagined political power to be gained from this war you also have the greatest fear potential. You know better than any other man upon Jemal what this war will actually mean."

"I don't know what you're talking about. You can't force me by any torture to—"

"The only torture will be of your own creation. Derl!"

The physicist lifted a box to the table and removed the protective cover exposing a block of silvered material. Callimus stared at it and knew instantly what it was. He tried to turn away from it, but it held him and drew him. It showered his mind with deep-dredged, unwanted thoughts and emotions.

"That is a thousand times the intensity of the strongest Imaginos we used," Theorn explained.

That was the last that Callimus seemed to hear from the world of the fantastic little room in the back of the Toymaker's shop.

He knew the sensation of succumbing to the illusions of the Imagines, but this was swifter, more intense, more terrifying. He was not in the make-believe world of the Sackes and the Brams this time. He was abroad on the streets of Curran City, but it was such a city as he had never before known.

The buildings were such heaps of fused rubble that for a time it was impossible to recognize his exact location. A pall of thick blue smoke overhung the endless piles of debris. He looked in the direction of the great spire of the Capitol and only a great, gaping hole in the skyline testified to its utter demolition.

There was a cold, tightening web about his heart. He knew it as fear, but such fear that it seemed a black alien thing invading his soul from some forgotten world. He was quite rational—and wondered how he could be before the onslaught of that black fear.

He did not know where he was going in that blackened and ruined city. Miraculously, he seemed alive while all else was dead. The smell of death and decay hung darkly over the wreckage of the great capitol of the System.

Some forgotten something seemed to be gnawing at his brain. Then he remembered it, his purpose in prowling through this dead city. Theis and Derrold—it seemed that he had crossed the world on foot in search of them. Theis, the beautiful, poetic wife of the forgotten magic years of his youth. Derrold, the son to fulfill his dreams of mighty leadership.

Somewhere, somehow, they had to be alive amid all this vast plain of death. The world would stop and die, if they should not live.

The hot sun beat down, and somewhere high above him, like a ghost through the blue smoke, he glimpsed a distant ship of Medral cruising as if it were a carrion eater in search of prey. As he watched the triumphant ship he reflected that victory was not all on the side of Medral. That world also lay in such ruin that a thousand years would scarcely see recovery from the blows struck by Jemal.

All this was the thing he had feared, he thought, but the thing he would not believe could happen. His own personal danger had always seemed utterly remote.

Now, as he plodded through the hot dust and over the broken fragments of paving and frozen lava streams, he wondered if the dead who lay beneath the tombs of the broken buildings were not to be envied.

After hours longer, he came to the place where rich gardens had once bloomed—where now only skeletal organic matter remained after the blasting of the deadly radiations of the Medralians. This place was the estate of Callimus, Senator, Head of the Security Committee.

This place was death.

He came to the top of the low rise and looked, and that was all. There was no more to be done. Where once his house had stood was only a mass that had flowed like melting grease into a shapeless heap. It had been quick, he thought. Theis and Derrold had never known what struck.

The agony was too great for tears. The fear was too great for defiance. He crumpled to the ground, the only living thing in all the vast ruin.

Derl covered the block again, and slowly Callimus felt his senses returning to the dingy back room of the toy shop.

Rold Theorn broke the long silence in which the eyes of Callimus shifted wildly like those of some caged animal.

"We have no idea what you saw," said Theorn, "because those things were your own thoughts, your own fears. They are things which you know are not only possible but probable, things which you have denied admission to your consciousness because you could not do so and continue your war-making. You could not have continued to defiantly assert the might of Jemal—and of Callimus. We know what you saw were fearful and terrible things, because only fearful and terrible things can come from the plans you have made."

Callimus looked at the circle of grim faces. He told himself what he had seen was only a fantastic dream, an illusion created to destroy him. But that black thing that was fear within him remained though the dream was gone. Its roots were planted so deeply within his brain and his heart that it could never be destroyed without destroying him and the things he had fought for. For the rest of his life he would bear that black inhabitant of his soul.

Rold Theorn leaned forward across the table and his voice was a hoarse, commanding whisper.

"Act, Callimus! Act—before it is too late!"

The eyes of the Jemalian leader turned from their wild ranging to a sudden stare. "Yes . . . you are right," said Callimus. "Before it is too late—"

His words were cut off by a sudden scream in the night, the scream of splitting air and the slash of fearful beams of energy. Then there came a slow, terrible rumbling like the boiling of the very substance of the planet upon which they stood.

The five men listened in sudden deathly silence. From far away came the rumble

of explosions as matter disrupted beneath a sudden onslaught.

Theorn slumped at the table. His voice was scarcely a murmur. "We've failed after all. Medral has attacked. This is the end of two worlds."

"No!" Reas Corper exclaimed. "There is still time. Offer unconditional surrender, Callimus! Get to a communicator! They'll accept your word temporarily. You have the authority. It can be confirmed later. Go!"

Callimus sat immobile as if witnessing some unfathomable horror the others could not see. The amplified, thousand-fold fears within him were screaming hideously within his brain, paralyzing with their rampant terror.

He struggled up to his feet. He started for the door. The scream of the air and the boiling rumble grew nearer. Suddenly the room shook as if a vast wind had twisted it. The men hurled to the floor and the walls parted to show the bloody glare of light in the night-time.

Reas Corper shook away the dullness from his mind, but not the sharp pain from legs that could not move. Derl and Theorn lay motionless nearby in the splintered wreckage of the room.

But Callimus was struggling to his feet. Though his eyes were still wild with fear in the crimson light of flaming sections of the city, the blasts seemed to have shaken the fear roots that were constricting his muscles.

"It may not be too late!" he cried as he ran, stumbling over rubble piles. "There may yet be time—!"

His fantastic figure vanished in the shadows of the firelit night.

Reas Corper made no move except to lie back and close his eyes. This was a terrible way to die, he thought. It was bad enough when a man died alone, but it was more than bearable to know that your death was also the death of great worlds. He wished he could have seen Eolana and Borren again. That might have helped a little bit.

Gradually, Reas became aware of a movement beside him and a figure rose to a sitting position. He recognized Dr. Tarro. The psychiatrist suddenly glanced about wildly. His eyes fell upon Reas.

"Callimus! What happened to him?"

"He apparently went off to attempt to surrender. At least that seemed to be his intention when he stumbled out of here."

Tarro grunted with satisfaction. "We were in time then—unless he gets himself killed on the way. He'll not let anything stop him."

Reas shook his head. "I hope you're

right, but it's hard to believe that Callimus, the warmaker, could be turned into a man who would struggle to stop a war of his own concoction."

"Callimus is no longer the warmaker. That is the point that I couldn't make. Theorn understand very well. Callimus' motivations have been completely reversed. In every man there are conflicting motives. Generally, one is represented by a fear that would throttle the opposite motive. If that fear can be multiplied many hundredfold, as you have seen tonight, the motives of the individual can be completely reversed. I have studied Callimus for many months, because I knew he would be the key figure in our plans once he became head of the Security Committee. I was confident of the capacity necessary to reverse him. In a lesser man it would have meant insanity, but Callimus is strong if nothing else.

"What of the others? Where are they? I don't seem to be able to see so well. I wonder if my eyes—"

"It's smoky now," said Reas.

"Perhaps that is all. I can't move. Something seems to be wrong with my legs. Theorn and Derl are over here near me, but they haven't moved. I can't see what might be wrong with them."

But even as he spoke he glimpsed the form of Theorn stirring slowly.

"Theorn! Are you all right?"

The peacemaker answered with a muffled grunt. Slowly and painfully he moved towards the others. After a time he and Tarro moved slowly to where Derl lay. The physicist was still alive, but terribly hurt.

Still the ships of Medral wheeled in the Jemalian sky. Much of their fire was drawn now by defending craft that spun and stabbed out in space against the fast dreadnaughts. Yet the attacks against the city were devastating.

As dawn filtered through the pall of fumes and smoke of destruction the four injured men in the ruins of the Toyshop of Horril Street lay in pain and despair and waning hope. Even Tarro was beginning to believe that somehow their work had failed, probably that Callimus had been killed.

Then suddenly Reas opened his eyes that had been long closed. He was lying flat on his back and staring up through the jagged splinters that had once formed the roof. He saw four of the Medralians cruising slowly. Circling about were a score of Jemalian fighter craft. But while he looked, the opposing fleets separated, and there was no fire between them. The

distance between them increased and they went their separate ways.

Reas Corper contemplated the miracle for a moment, then pointed aloft and exclaimed shrilly, "Look! They aren't fighting any more! They're leaving."

The others looked up. Six more Medralians passed overhead as if to keep a rendezvous with their sister ships, but their destroying fire had ceased.

Tarro's voice almost held a sob. "Callimus made it. I knew I hadn't misjudged him. He's saved Jemal, and he'll become the greatest peacemaker the world has ever known, because the populace will have a belligerency index approaching zero. They'll make him President because he brought peace."

Yes, that's the way it would work out, Reas thought. Callimus would get the credit for saving Jemal and Medral, but the worlds ought to know the true story. They never would; political considerations would make it impossible to reveal the part that Theorn and his companions had played.

"Somehow it ought to be possible to at least let future generations know that the true peacemaker was Rold Theorn,

not Callimus, even if we can't tell it now."

"I want no credit," said Theorn. "I once read the work of one of our archeologists who investigated some ruins on an ancient world that destroyed itself just as Jemal and Medral might have done. It was written there, 'Blessed are the peacemakers—': That is true, and that is enough. Peacemaking is its own blessing. There is still much for all of us to do. We very nearly failed. We must increase and improve the guardians of the peace, so that there can never be such another narrow escape. We must find ways to make them last a thousand years."

Reas looked puzzled. "I don't understand what you are talking about."

"The Imaginos, of course. We have fifteen million of them in circulation. We must make it a hundred times that number and improve their recording permanency so that they will still be in use centuries from now, whenever some unborn Jemalian ruler threatens a war of conquest."

"Perhaps by the end of that time, the guardian Imaginos will not be needed."

VINTAGE SEASON

By LAWRENCE O'DONNELL

Everybody seemed to want the old house during May—and seemed willing to pay fantastic prices for the privilege. Strange tourists they were, too. The Café Society of another time.

THREE people came up the walk to the old mansion just at dawn on a perfect May morning. Oliver Wilson in his pajamas watched them from an upper window through a haze of conflicting emotions, resentment predominant. He didn't want them there.

They were foreigners. He knew only that much about them. They had the curious name of Sancisco, and their first names, scrawled in loops on the lease, appeared to be Omerie, Kleph and Klia, though it was impossible as he looked down upon them now to sort them out by signature. He hadn't even been sure whether they would be men or women, and he had expected something a little less cosmopolitan.

Oliver's heart sank a little as he watched them follow the taxi driver up the walk. He had hoped for less self-assurance in his unwelcome tenants, because he meant to force them out of the house if he could. It didn't look very promising from here.

The man went first. He was tall and dark, and he wore his clothes and carried his body with that peculiar arrogant assurance that comes from perfect confidence in every phase of one's being. The two women were laughing as they followed him. Their voices were light and sweet, and their faces were beautiful, each in its own exotic way, but the first thing Oliver thought of when he looked at them was, "Expensive!"

It was not only that patina of perfection

that seemed to dwell in every line of their incredibly flawless garments. There are degrees of wealth beyond which wealth itself ceases to have significance. Oliver had seen before, on rare occasions, something like this assurance that the earth turning beneath their well-shod feet turned only to their whim.

It puzzled him a little in this case, because he had the feeling as the three came up the walk that the beautiful clothing they wore so confidently was not clothing they were accustomed to. There was a curious air of condescension in the way they moved. Like women in costume. They minced a little on their delicate high heels, held out an arm to stare at the cut of a sleeve, twisted now and then inside their garments as if the clothing sat strangely on them, as if they were accustomed to something entirely different.

And there was an elegance about the way the garments fitted them which even to Oliver looked strikingly unusual. Only an actress on the screen, who can stop time and the film to adjust every disarrayed fold so that she looks perpetually perfect, might appear thus elegantly clad. But let these women move as they liked, and each fold of their clothing followed perfectly into place again. One might almost suspect the garments were not cut of ordinary cloth, or that they were cut according to some unknown, subtle scheme, with many artful hidden seams placed by a tailor incredibly skilled at his trade.

They seemed excited. They talked in high, clear, very sweet voices, looking up at the perfect blue and transparent sky in which dawn was still frankly pink. They looked at the trees on the lawn, the leaves translucently green with an under color of golden newness, the edges crimped from constriction in the recent bud.

Happily and with excitement in their voices they called to the man, and when he answered his own voice blended so perfectly in cadence with theirs that it sounded like three people singing together. Their voices, like their clothing, seemed to have an elegance far beyond the ordinary, to be under a control such as Oliver Wilson had never dreamed of before this morning.

The taxi driver brought up the luggage, which was of a beautiful pale stuff that did not look quite like leather, and had curves in it so subtle it seemed square until you saw how two or three pieces of it fitted together when carried, into a perfectly balanced block. It was scuffed, as if from much use. And though there

was a great deal of it, the taxi man did not seem to find his burden heavy. Oliver saw him look down at it now and then and heft the weight incredulously.

One of the women had very black hair, and a skin like cream, and smoke-blue eyes heavy-lidded with the weight of her lashes. It was the other woman Oliver's gaze followed as she came up the walk. Her hair was a clear, pale red, and her face had a softness that he thought would be like velvet to touch. She was tanned to a warm amber darker than her hair.

Just as they reached the porch steps the fair woman lifted her head and looked up. She gazed straight into Oliver's eyes and he saw that hers were very blue, and just a little amused, as if she had known he was there all along. Also they were frankly admiring.

Feeling a bit dizzy, Oliver hurried back to his room to dress.

"We are here on a vacation," the dark man said, accepting the keys. "We will not wish to be disturbed, as I made clear in our correspondence. You have engaged a cook and housemaid for us, I understand? We will expect you to move your own belongings out of the house, then, and—"

"Wait," Oliver said uncomfortably. "Something's come up. I—" He hesitated, not sure just how to present it. These were such increasingly odd people. Even their speech was odd. They spoke so distinctly, not slurring any of the words into contractions. English seemed as familiar to them as a native tongue, but they all spoke as trained singers sing, with perfect breath control and voice placement.

And there was a coldness in the man's voice, as if some gulf lay between him and Oliver, so deep no feeling of human contact could bridge it.

"I wonder," Oliver said, "If I could find you better living quarters somewhere else in town. There's a place across the street that—"

The dark woman said, "Oh, no!" in a lightly horrified voice, and all three of them laughed. It was cool, distant laughter that did not include Oliver.

The dark man said: "We chose this house carefully, Mr. Wilson. We would not be interested in living anywhere else."

Oliver said desperately, "I don't see why. It isn't even a modern house. I have two others in much better condition. Even across the street you'd have a fine view of the city. Here there isn't anything. The other houses cut off the view, and—"

"We engaged rooms here, Mr. Wilson."

the man said with finality. "We expect to use them. Now will you make arrangements to leave as soon as possible?"

Oliver said, "No," and looked stubborn. "That isn't in the lease. You can live here until next month, since you paid for it, but you can't put me out. I'm staying."

The man opened his mouth to say something. He looked coldly at Oliver and closed it again. The feeling of aloofness was chill between them. There was a moment's silence. Then the man said:

"Very well. Be kind enough to stay out of our way."

It was a little odd that he didn't inquire Oliver's motives. Oliver was not yet sure enough of the man to explain. He couldn't very well say, "Since the lease was signed, I've been offered three times what the house is worth if I'll sell it before the end of May." He couldn't say, "I want the money, and I'm going to use my own nuisance-value to annoy you until you're willing to move out." After all, there seemed no reason why they shouldn't. After seeing them, there seemed doubly no reason, for it was clear they must be accustomed to surroundings infinitely better than this time-worn old house.

It was very strange, the value this house had so suddenly acquired. There was no reason at all why two groups of semianonymous people should be so eager to possess it for the month of May.

In silence Oliver showed his tenants upstairs to the three big bedrooms across the front of the house. He was intensely conscious of the red-haired woman and the way she watched him with a sort of obviously covert interest, quite warmly, and with a curious undertone to her interest that he could not quite place. It was familiar, but elusive. He thought how pleasant it would be to talk to her alone, if only to try to capture that elusive attitude and put a name to it.

Afterward he went down to the telephone and called his fiancée.

Sue's voice squeaked a little with excitement over the wire.

"Oliver, so early? Why, it's hardly six yet. Did you tell them what I said? Are they going to go?"

"Can't tell yet. I doubt it. After all, Sue, I did take their money, you know."

"Oliver, they've got to go! You've got to do something!"

"I'm trying, Sue. But I don't like it."

"Well, there isn't any reason why they shouldn't stay somewhere else. And we're going to need that money. You'll just have to think of something, Oliver."

Oliver met his own worried-eyes in the

mirror above the telephone and scowled at himself. His straw-colored hair was tangled and there was a shining stubble on his pleasant, tanned face. He was sorry the red-haired woman had first seen him in this untidy condition. Then his conscience smote him at the sound of Sue's determined voice and he said:

"I'll try, darling. I'll try. But I did take their money."

They had, in fact, paid a great deal of money, considerably more than the rooms were worth even in that year of high prices and high wages. The country was just moving into one of those fabulous eras which are later referred to as the Gay Forties or the Golden Sixties—a pleasant period of national euphoria. It was a stimulating time to be alive—while it lasted.

"All right," Oliver said resignedly. "I'll do my best."

But he was conscious, as the next few days went by, that he was not doing his best. There were several reasons for that. From the beginning the idea of making himself a nuisance to his tenants had been Sue's, not Oliver's. And if Oliver had been a little less compliant or Sue a little less determined the whole project would never have got under way. Reason was on Sue's side, but—

For one thing, the tenants were so fascinating. All they said and did had a queer sort of inversion to it, as if a mirror had been held up to ordinary living and in the reflection showed strange variations from the norm. Their minds worked on a different basic premise. Oliver thought, from his own. They seemed to derive covert amusement from the most unamusing things; they patronized, they were aloof with a quality of cold detachment which did not prevent them from laughing inexplicably far too often for Oliver's comfort.

He saw them occasionally, on their way to and from their rooms. They were polite and distant, not, he suspected, from anger at his presence but from sheer indifference.

Most of the day they spent out of the house. The perfect May weather held unbroken and they seemed to give themselves up wholeheartedly to admiration of it, entirely confident that the warm, pale-gold sunshine and the scented air would not be interrupted by rain or cold. They were so sure of it that Oliver felt uneasy.

They took only one meal a day in the house, a late dinner. And their reactions to the meal were unpredictable. Laughter

greeted some of the dishes, and a sort of delicate disgust others. No one would touch the salad, for instance. And the fish seemed to cause a wave of queer embarrassment around the table.

They dressed elaborately for each dinner. The man—his name was Omerie—looked extremely handsome in his dinner clothes, but he seemed a little sulky and Oliver twice heard the women laughing because he had to wear black. Oliver entertained a sudden vision, for no reason, of the man in garments as bright and as subtly cut as the women's, and it seemed somehow very right for him. He wore even the dark clothing with a certain flamboyance, as if cloth-of-gold would be more normal for him.

When they were in the house at other meal times, they ate in their rooms. They must have brought a great deal of food with them, from whatever mysterious place they had come. Oliver wondered with increasing curiosity where it might be. Delicious odors drifted into the hall sometimes, at odd hours, from their closed doors. Oliver could not identify them, but almost always they smelled irresistible. A few times the food-smell was rather shockingly unpleasant, almost nauseating. It takes a connoisseur, Oliver reflected, to appreciate the decadent. And these people, almost certainly, were connoisseurs.

Why they lived so contentedly in this huge, ramshackle old house was a question that disturbed his dreams at night. Or why they refused to move. He caught some fascinating glimpses into their rooms, which appeared to have been changed almost completely by additions he could not have defined very clearly from the brief sights he had of them. The feeling of luxury which his first glance at them had evoked was confirmed by the richness of the hangings they had apparently brought with them, the half-glanced ornaments, the pictures on the walls, even the whiffs of exotic perfume that floated from half-open doors.

He saw the women go by him in the halls, moving softly through the brown dimness in their gowns so uncannily perfect in fit, so lushly rich, so glowingly colored they seemed unreal. That poise born of confidence in the subservience of the world gave them an imperious aloofness, but more than once Oliver, meeting the blue gaze of the woman with the red hair and the soft, tanned skin, thought he saw quickened interest there. She smiled at him in the dimness and went

by in a haze of fragrance and halo of incredible richness, and the warmth of the smile lingered after she had gone.

He knew she did not mean this aloofness to last between them. From the very first he was sure of that. When the time came she would make the opportunity to be alone with him. The thought was confusing and tremendously exciting. There was nothing he could do but wait, knowing she would see him when it suited her.

On the third day he lunched with Sue in a little downtown restaurant overlooking the great sweep of the metropolis across the river far below. Sue had shining brown curls and brown eyes, and her chin was a bit more prominent than is strictly accordant with beauty. From childhood Sue had known what she wanted and how to get it, and it seemed to Oliver just now that she had never wanted anything quite so much as the sale of this house.

"It's such a marvelous offer for the old mausoleum," she said, breaking into a roll with a gesture of violence. "We'll never have a chance like that again, and prices are so high we'll need the money to start housekeeping. Surely you can do *something*, Oliver!"

"I'm trying," Oliver assured her uncomfortably.

"Have you heard anything more from that madwoman who wants to buy it?"

Oliver shook his head. "Her attorney phoned again yesterday. Nothing new. I wonder who she is."

"I don't think even the attorney knows. All this mystery—I don't like it, Oliver. Even those Sancisco people—What did they do today?"

Oliver laughed. "They spent about an hour this morning telephoning movie theaters in the city, checking up on a lot of third-rate films they want to see parts of."

"Parts of? But why?"

"I don't know. I think . . . oh, nothing. More coffee?"

The trouble was, he thought he did know. It was too unlikely a guess to tell Sue about, and without familiarity with the Sancisco oddities she would only think Oliver was losing his mind. But he had from their talk, a definite impression that there was an actor in bit parts in all these films whose performances they mentioned with something very near to awe. They referred to him as Golconda, which didn't appear to be his name, so that Oliver had no way of guessing which obscure bit-

player it was they admired so deeply. Golconda might have been the name of a character he had once played—and with superlative skill, judging by the comments of the Sancisoes—but to Oliver it mean nothing at all.

"They do funny things," he said, stirring his coffee reflectively. "Yesterday Omeric—that's the man—came in with a book of poems published about five years ago, and all of them handled it like a first edition of Shakespeare. I never even heard of the author, but he seems to be a tin god in their country, wherever that is."

"You still don't know? Haven't they even dropped any hints?"

"We don't do much talking," Oliver reminded her with some irony.

"I know, but— Oh, well, I guess it doesn't matter. Go on, what else do they do?"

"Well, this morning they were going to spend studying 'Golconda' and his great art, and this afternoon I think they're taking a trip up the river to some sort of shrine I never heard of. It isn't very far, wherever it is, because I know they're coming back for dinner. Some great man's birthplace, I think—they promised to take home souvenirs of the place if they could get any. They're typical tourists, all right—if I could only figure out what's behind the whole thing. It doesn't make sense."

"Nothing about that house makes sense any more. I do wish—"

She went on in a petulant voice, but Oliver ceased suddenly to hear her, because just outside the door, walking with imperial elegance on her high heels, a familiar figure passed. He did not see her face, but he thought he would know that poise, that richness of line and motion, anywhere on earth.

"Excuse me a minute," he muttered to Sue, and was out of his chair before she could speak. He made the door in half a dozen long strides, and the beautifully elegant passer-by was only a few steps away when he got there. Then, with the words he had meant to speak already half uttered, he fell silent and stood there staring.

It was not the red-haired woman. It was not her dark companion. It was a stranger. He watched, speechless, while the lovely, imperious creature moved on through the crowd and vanished, moving with familiar poise and assurance and an equally familiar strangeness as if the beautiful and exquisitely fitted garments she wore were an exotic costume to her, as they had always seemed to the San-

sisco women. Every other woman on the street looked untidy and ill-at-ease beside her. Walking like a queen, she melted into the crowd and was gone.

She came from *their* country, Oliver told himself dizzily. So someone else nearby had mysterious tenants in this month of perfect May weather. Someone else was puzzling in vain today over the strangeness of the people from that nameless land.

In silence he went back to Sue.

The door stood invitingly ajar in the brown dimness of the upper hall. Oliver's steps slowed as he drew near it, and his heart began to quicken correspondingly. It was the red-haired woman's room, and he thought the door was not open by accident. Her name, he knew now, was Kleph.

The door creaked a little on its hinges and from within a very sweet voice said lazily, "Won't you come in?"

The room looked very different indeed. The big bed had been pushed back against the wall and a cover thrown over it that brushed the floor all around looked like soft-haired fur except that it was a pale blue-green and sparkled as if every hair were tipped with invisible crystals. Three books lay open on the fur, and a very curious-looking magazine with faintly luminous printing and a page of pictures that at first glance appeared three-dimensional. Also a tiny porcelain pipe encrusted with porcelain flowers, and a thin wisp of smoke floating from the bowl.

Above the bed a broad picture hung, framing a square of blue water so real Oliver had to look twice to be sure it was not rippling gently from left to right. From the ceiling swung a crystal globe on a glass cord. It turned gently, the light from the windows making curved rectangles in its sides.

Under the center window a sort of chaise longue stood which Oliver had not seen before. He could only assume it was at least partly pneumatic and had been brought in the luggage. There was a very rich-looking quilted cloth covering and hiding it, embossed all over in shining metallic patterns.

Kleph moved slowly from the door and sank upon the chaise longue with a little sigh of content. The couch accommodated itself to her body with what looked like delightful comfort. Kleph wriggled a little and then smiled up at Oliver.

"Do come on in. Sit over there, where you can see out the window. I love your beautiful spring weather. You know, there never was a May like it in civilized times."

She said that quite seriously, her blue eyes on Oliver's, and there was a hint of patronage in her voice, as if the weather had been arranged especially for her.

Oliver started across the room and then paused and looked down in amazement at the floor, which felt unstable. He had not noticed before that the carpet was pure white, unspotted, and sank about an inch under the pressure of the feet. He saw then that Kleph's feet were bare, or almost bare. She wore something like gossamer buskins of filmy net, fitting her feet exactly. The bare soles were pink as if they had been rouged, and the nails had a liquid gleam like tiny mirrors. He moved closer, and was not as surprised as he should have been to see that they really were tiny mirrors, painted with some lacquer that gave them reflecting surfaces.

"Do sit down," Kleph said again, waving a white-sleeved arm toward a chair by the window. She wore a garment that looked like short, soft down, loosely cut but following perfectly every motion she made. And there was something curiously different about her very shape today. When Oliver saw her in street clothes, she had the square-shouldered, slim-flanked figure that all women strive for, but here in her lounging robe she looked—well, different. There was an almost swanlike slope to her shoulders today, a roundness and softness to her body that looked unfamiliar and very appealing.

"Will you have some tea?" Kleph asked, and smiled charmingly.

A low table beside her held a tray and several small covered cups, lovely things with an inner glow like rose quartz, the color shining deeply as if from within layer upon layer of translucence. She took up one of the cups—there were no saucers—and offered it to Oliver.

It felt fragile and thin as paper in his hand. He could not see the contents because of the cup's cover, which seemed to be one with the cup itself and left only a thin open crescent at the rim. Steam rose from the opening.

Kleph took up a cup of her own and tilted it to her lips, smiling at Oliver over the rim. She was very beautiful. The pale red hair lay in shining loops against her head and the corona of curls like a halo above her forehead might have been pressed down like a wreath. Every hair kept order as perfectly as if it had been painted on, though the breeze from the window stirred now and then among the softly shining strands.

Oliver tried the tea. Its flavor was exquisite, very hot, and the taste that lingered upon his tongue was like the

scent of flowers. It was an extremely feminine drink. He sipped again, surprised to find how much he liked it.

The scent of flowers seemed to increase as he drank, swirling through his head like smoke. After the third sip there was a faint buzzing in his ears. The bees among the flowers, perhaps, he thought incoherently—and sipped again.

Kleph watched him, smiling.

"The others will be out all afternoon," she told Oliver comfortably. "I thought it would give us a pleasant time to be acquainted."

Oliver was rather horrified to hear himself saying, "What makes you talk like that?" He had had no idea of asking the question; something seemed to have loosened his control over his own tongue.

Kleph's smile deepened. She tipped the cup to her lips and there was indulgence in her voice when she said, "What do you mean by that?"

He waved his hand vaguely, noting with some surprise that at a glance it seemed to have six or seven fingers as it moved past his face.

"I don't know—precision, I guess. Why don't you say 'don't', for instance?"

"In our country we are trained to speak with precision," Kleph explained. "Just as we are trained to move and dress and think with precision. Any slovenliness is trained out of us in childhood. With you, of course—" She was polite. "With you, this does not happen to be a national fetish. With us, we have time for the amenities. We like them."

Her voice had grown sweeter and sweeter as she spoke, until by now it was almost indistinguishable from the sweetness of the flower-scent in Oliver's head, and the delicate flavor of the tea.

"What country do you come from?" he asked, and tilted the cup again to drink, mildly surprised to notice that it seemed inexhaustible.

Kleph's smile was definitely patronizing this time. It didn't irritate him. Nothing could irritate him just now. The whole room swam in a beautiful rosy glow as fragrant as the flowers.

"We must not speak of that, Mr. Wilson."

"But—" Oliver paused. After all, it was, of course, none of his business. "This is a vacation?" he asked vaguely.

"Call it a pilgrimage, perhaps."

"Pilgrimage?" Oliver was so interested that for an instant his mind came back into sharp focus. "To—what?"

"I should not have said that, Mr. Wilson. Please forget it. Do you like the tea?"

"Very much."

"You will have guessed by now that it is not only tea, but an euphoric."

Oliver stared. "Euphoric?"

Kleph made a descriptive circle in the air with one graceful hand, and laughed. "You do not feel the effects yet? Surely you do?"

"I feel," Oliver said, "the way I'd feel after four whiskeys."

Kleph shuddered delicately. "We get our euphoria less painfully. And without the after-effects your barbarous alcohols used to have." She bit her lip. "Sorry. I must be euphoric myself to speak so freely. Please forgive me. Shall we have some music?"

Kleph leaned backward on the chaise longue and reached toward the wall beside her. The sleeve, falling away from her round tanned arm, left bare the inside of the wrist, and Oliver was startled to see there a long, rosy streak of fading scar. His inhibitions had dissolved in the fumes of the fragrant tea; he caught his breath and leaned forward to stare.

Kleph shook the sleeve back over the scar with a quick gesture. Color came into her face beneath the softly tinted tan and she would not meet Oliver's eyes. A queer shame seemed to have fallen upon her.

Oliver said tactlessly, "What is it? What's the matter?"

Still she would not look at him. Much later he understood that shame and knew she had reason for it. Now he listened blankly as she said:

"Nothing . . . nothing at all. A . . . an inoculation. All of us . . . oh, never mind. Listen to the music."

This time she reached out with the other arm. She touched nothing, but when she had held her hand near the wall a sound breathed through the room. It was the sound of water, the sighing waves receding upon long, sloped beaches. Oliver followed Kleph's gaze toward the picture of the blue water above the bed.

The waves there were moving. More than that, the point of vision moved. Slowly the seascape drifted past, moving with the waves, following them toward shore. Oliver watched, half-hypnotized by a motion that seemed at the time quite acceptable and not in the least surprising.

The waves lifted and broke in creaming foam and ran seething up a sandy beach. Then through the sound of the water music began to breathe, and through the water itself a man's face dawned in the frame, smiling intimately into the room. He held an oddly archaic musical instrument, lute-shaped, its body striped light and dark like a melon and

its long neck bent back over his shoulder. He was singing, and Oliver felt mildly astonished at the song. It was very familiar and very odd indeed. He groped through the unfamiliar rhythms and found at last a thread to catch the tune by—it was "Make-Believe," from "Showboat," but certainly a showboat that had never steamed up the Mississippi.

"What's he doing to it?" he demanded after a few moments of outraged listening. "I never heard anything like it!"

Kleph laughed and stretched out her arm again. Enigmatically she said, "We call it kyling. Never mind. How do you like this?"

It was a comedian, a man in semi-clown make-up, his eyes exaggerated so that they seemed to cover half his face. He stood by a broad glass pillar before a dark curtain and sang a gay, staccato song interspersed with patter that sounded impromptu, and all the while his left hand did an intricate, musical tattoo of the nailtips on the glass of the column. He strolled around and around it as he sang. The rhythms of his fingernails blended with the song and swung widely away into patterns of their own, and blended again without a break.

It was confusing to follow. The song made even less sense than the monologue, which had something to do with a lost slipper and was full of allusions which made Kleph smile, but were utterly unintelligible to Oliver. The man had a dry brittle style that was not very amusing, though Kleph seemed fascinated. Oliver was interested to see in him an extension and a variation of that extreme smooth confidence which marked all three of the Sanciscoes. Clearly a racial trait, he thought.

Other performances followed, some of them fragmentary as if lifted out of a completer version. One he knew. The obvious, stirring melody struck his recognition before the figures—marching men against a haze, a great banner rolling backward above them in the smoke, foreground figures striding gigantically and shouting in rhythm, "Forward, forward the lily banners go!"

The music was tinny, the images blurred and poorly colored, but there was a gusto about the performance that caught at Oliver's imagination. He stared, remembering the old film from long ago. Dennis King and a ragged chorus, singing "The Song of the Vagabonds" from—was it "Vagabond King?"

"A very old one," Kleph said apologetically. "But I like it."

The steam of the intoxicating tea swirled between Oliver and the picture. Music swelled and sank through the room and the fragrant fumes and his own euphoric brain. Nothing seemed strange. He had discovered how to drink the tea. Like nitrous oxide, the effect was not cumulative. When you reached a peak of euphoria, you could not increase the peak. It was best to wait for a slight dip in the effect of the stimulant before taking more.

Otherwise it had most of the effects of alcohol—everything after awhile dissolved into a delightful fog through which all he saw was uniformly enchanting and partook of the qualities of a dream. He questioned nothing. Afterward he was not certain how much of it he really had dreamed.

There was the dancing doll, for instance. He remembered it quite clearly, in sharp focus—a tiny, slender woman with a long-nosed, dark-eyed face and a pointed chin. She moved delicately across the white rug—knee-high, exquisite. Her features were as mobile as her body, and she danced lightly, with resounding strokes of her toes, each echoing like a bell. It was a formalized sort of dance, and she sang breathlessly in accompaniment, making amusing little grimaces. Certainly it was a portrait-doll, animated to mimic the original perfectly in voice and motion. Afterward, Oliver knew he must have dreamed it.

What else happened he was quite unable to remember later. He knew Kleph had said some curious things, but they all made sense at the time, and afterward he couldn't remember a word. He knew he had been offered little glittering candies in a transparent dish, and that some of them had been delicious; and one or two so bitter his tongue still curled the next day when he recalled them, and one—Kleph sucked luxuriantly on the same kind—of a taste that was actively nauseating.

As for Kleph herself—he was frantically uncertain the next day what had really happened. He thought he could remember the softness of her white-downed arms clasped at the back of his neck, while she laughed up at him and exhaled into his face the flowery fragrance of the tea. But beyond that he was totally unable to recall anything, for awhile.

There was a brief interlude later, before the oblivion of sleep. He was almost sure he remembered a moment when the other two Sanciscoes stood looking down at him, the man scowling, the

smoky-eyed woman smiling a derisive smile.

The man said, from a vast distance, "Kleph, you know this is against every rule—" His voice began in a thin hum and soared in fantastic flight beyond the range of hearing. Oliver thought he remembered the dark woman's laughter, thin and distant too, and the hum of her voice like bees in flight.

"Kleph, Kleph, you silly little fool, can we never trust you out of sight?"

Kleph's voice then said something that seemed to make no sense. "What does it matter, *here?*"

The man answered in that buzzing, faraway hum. "—matter of giving your bond before you leave, not to interfere. You know you signed the rules—"

Kleph's voice, nearer and more intelligible: "But here the difference is . . . it does not matter *here!* You both know that. How could it matter?"

Oliver felt the downy brush of his sleeve against his cheek, but he saw nothing except the slow, smoke-like ebb and flow of darkness past his eyes. He heard the voices wrangle musically from far away, and he heard them cease.

When he woke the next morning, alone in his own room, he woke with the memory of Kleph's eyes upon him very sorrowfully, her lovely tanned face looking down on him with the red hair falling fragrantly on each side of it and sadness and compassion in her eyes. He thought he had probably dreamed that. There was no reason why anyone should look at him with such sadness.

Sue telephoned that day.

"Oliver, the people who want to buy the house are here. That madwoman and her husband. Shall I bring them over?"

Oliver's mind all day had been hazy with the vague, bewildering memories of yesterday. Kleph's face kept floating before him, blotting out the room. He said, "What? I . . . oh, well, bring them if you want to. I don't see what good it'll do."

"Oliver, what's wrong with you? We agreed we needed the money, didn't we? I don't see how you can think of passing up such a wonderful bargain without even a struggle. We could get married and buy our own house right away, and you know we'll never get such an offer again for that old trash-heap. Wake up, Oliver!"

Oliver made an effort. "I know. Sue—I know. But—"

"Oliver, you've got to think of something!" Her voice was imperious.

He knew she was right. Kleph or no Kleph, the bargain shouldn't be ignored if there were any way at all of getting the tenants out. He wondered again what made the place so suddenly priceless to so many people. And what the last week in May had to do with the value of the house.

A sudden sharp curiosity pierced even the vagueness of his mind today. May's last week was so important that the whole sale of the house stood or fell upon occupancy by then. Why? Why?

"What's going to happen next week?" he asked rhetorically of the telephone. "Why can't they wait till these people leave? I'd knock a couple of thousand off the price if they'd—"

"You would not, Oliver Wilson! I can buy all our refrigeration units with that extra money. You'll just have to work out some way to give possession by next week, and that's that. You hear me?"

"Keep your shirt on," Oliver said pacifically. "I'm only human, but I'll try."

"I'm bringing the people over right away," Sue told him. "While the Sanciscoes are still out. Now you put your mind to work and think of something, Oliver." She paused, and her voice was reflective when she spoke again. "They're . . . awfully odd people, darling."

"Odd?"

"You'll see."

It was an elderly woman and a very young man who trailed Sue up the walk. Oliver knew immediately what had struck Sue about them. He was somehow not at all surprised to see that both wore their clothing with the familiar air of elegant self-consciousness he had come to know so well. They, too, looked around them at the beautiful, sunny afternoon with conscious enjoyment and an air of faint condescension. He knew before he heard them speak how musical their voices would be and how meticulously they would pronounce each word.

There was no doubt about it. The people of Kleph's mysterious country were arriving here in force—for something. For the last week of May? He shrugged mentally; there was no way of guessing—yet. One thing only was sure: all of them must come from that nameless land where people controlled their voices like singers and their garments like actors who could stop the reel of time itself to adjust every disordered fold.

The elderly woman took full charge of the conversation from the start. They stood together on the rickety, unpainted porch, and Sue had no chance even for introductions.

"Young man. I am Madame Hollia. This is my husband." Her voice had an undercurrent of harshness, which was perhaps age. And her face looked almost corsetted, the loose flesh coerced into something like firmness by some invisible method Oliver could not guess at. The make-up was so skillful he could not be certain it was make-up at all, but he had a definite feeling that she was much older than she looked. It would have taken a lifetime of command to put so much authority into the harsh, deep, musically controlled voice.

The young man said nothing. He was very handsome. His type, apparently, was one that does not change much no matter in what culture or country it may occur. He wore beautifully tailored garments and carried in one gloved hand a box of red leather, about the size and shape of a book.

Madame Hollia went on. "I understand your problem about the house. You wish to sell to me, but are legally bound by your lease with Omerie and his friends. Is that right?"

Oliver nodded. "But—"

"Let me finish. If Omerie can be forced to vacate before next week, you will accept our offer. Right? Very well. Hara!" She nodded to the young man beside her. He jumped to instant attention, bowed slightly, said, "Yes, Hollia," and slipped a gloved hand into his coat.

Madame Hollia took the little object offered on his palm, her gesture as she reached for it almost imperial, as if royal robes swept from her outstretched arm.

"Here," she said, "is something that may help us. My dear"—she held it out to Sue—"if you can hide this somewhere about the house. I believe your unwelcome tenants will not trouble you much longer."

Sue took the thing curiously. It looked like a tiny silver box, no more than an inch square, indented at the top and with no line to show it could be opened.

"Wait a minute," Oliver broke in uneasily. "What is it?"

"Nothing that will harm anyone, I assure you."

"Then what—"

Madame Hollia's imperious gesture at one sweep silenced him and commanded Sue forward. "Go on, my dear. Hurry, before Omerie comes back. I can assure you there is no danger to anyone."

Oliver broke in determinedly. "Madame Hollia, I'll have to know what your plans are. I—"

"Oh, Oliver, please!" Sue's fingers closed over the silver cube. "Don't worry

about it. I'm sure Madame Hollia knows best. Don't you *want* to get those people out?"

"Of course I do. But I don't want the house blown up or—"

Madame Hollia's deep laughter was indulgent. "Nothing so crude, I promise you, Mr. Wilson. Remember, we want the house! Hurry, my dear."

Sue nodded and slipped hastily past Oliver into the hall. Out-numbered, he subsided uneasily. The young man, Hara, tapped a negligent foot and admired the sunlight as they waited. It was an afternoon as perfect as all of May had been, translucent gold, balmy with an edge of chill lingering in the air to point up a perfect contrast with the summer to come. Hara looked around him confidently, like a man paying just tribute to a stage-set provided wholly for himself. He even glanced up at a drone from above and followed the course of a big transcontinental plane half dissolved in golden haze high in the sun. "Quaint," he murmured in a gratified voice.

Sue came back and slipped her hand through Oliver's arm, squeezing excitedly. "There," she said. "How long will it take, Madame Hollia?"

"That will depend, my dear. Not very long. Now, Mr. Wilson, one word with you. You live here also, I understand? For your own comfort, take my advice and—"

Somewhere within the house a door slammed and a clear, high voice rang wordlessly up a rippling scale. Then there was the sound of feet on the stairs, and a single line of song. "*Come hider, love, to me—*"

Hara started, almost dropping the red leather box he held.

"Kleph!" he said in a whisper. "Or Klia. I know they both just came on from Canterbury. But I thought—"

"Hush." Madame Hollia's features composed themselves into an imperious blank. She breathed triumphantly through her nose, drew back upon herself and turned an imposing facade to the door.

Kleph wore the same softly downy robe Oliver had seen before, except that today it was not white, but a pale, clear blue that gave her tan an apricot flush. She was smiling.

"Why, Hollia!" Her tone was at its most musical. "I thought I recognized voices from home. How nice to see you. No one knew you were coming to the—" She broke off and glanced at Oliver and then away again. "Hara, too," she said. "What a pleasant surprise."

Sue said flatly, "When did *you* get back?"

Kleph smiled at her. "You must be the little Miss Johnson. Why, I did not go out at all. I was tired of sight-seeing. I have been napping in my room."

Sue drew in her breath in something that just escaped being a disbelieving sniff. A look flashed between the two women, and for an instant held—and that instant was timeless. It was an extraordinary pause in which a great deal of wordless interplay took place in the space of a second.

Oliver saw the quality of Kleph's smile at Sue, that same look of quiet confidence he had noticed so often about all these strange people. He saw Sue's quick inventory of the other woman, and he saw how Sue squared her shoulders and stood up straight, smoothing down her summer frock over her flat hips so that for an instant she stood posed consciously, looking down on Kleph. It was deliberate. Bewildered, he glanced again at Kleph.

Kleph's shoulders sloped softly, her robe was belted to a tiny waist and hung in deep folds over frankly rounded hips. Sue's was the fashionable figure—but Sue was the first to surrender.

Kleph's smile did not falter. But in the silence there was an abrupt reversal of values, based on no more than the measureless quality of Kleph's confidence in herself, the quiet assured smile. It was suddenly made very clear that fashion is not a constant. Kleph's curious, out-of-mode curves without warning became the norm, and Sue was a queer, angular, half-masculine creature beside her.

Oliver had no idea how it was done. Somehow the authority passed in a breath from one woman to the other. Beauty is almost wholly a matter of fashion; what is beautiful today would have been grotesque a couple of generations ago and will be grotesque a hundred years ahead. It will be worse than grotesque; it will be outmoded and therefore faintly ridiculous.

Sue was that. Kleph had only to exert her authority to make it clear to everyone on the porch. Kleph was a beauty, suddenly and very convincingly, beautiful in the accepted mode, and Sue was amusingly old-fashioned, an anachronism in her lithe, square-shouldered slimness. She did not belong. She was grotesque among these strangely immaculate people.

Sue's collapse was complete. But pride sustained her, and bewilderment. Probably she never did grasp entirely what was wrong. She gave Kleph one glance of burning resentment and when her eyes

came back to Oliver there was suspicion in them, and mistrust.

Looking backward later, Oliver thought that in that moment, for the first time clearly, he began to suspect the truth. But he had no time to ponder it, for after the brief instant of enmity the three people from—elsewhere—began to speak all at once, as if in a belated attempt to cover something they did not want noticed.

Kleph said, "This beautiful weather—" and Madame Hollia said, "So fortunate to have this house—" and Hara, holding up the red leather box, said loudest of all, "Cenbe sent you this, Kleph. His latest."

Kleph put out both hands for it eagerly, the eiderdown sleeves falling back from her rounded arms. Oliver had a quick glimpse of that mysterious scar before the sleeve fell back, and it seemed to him that there was the faintest trace of a similar scar vanishing into Hara's cuff as he let his own arm drop.

"Cenbe!" Kleph cried, her voice high and sweet and delighted. "How wonderful! What period?"

"From November 1664," Hara said. "London, of course, though I think there may be some counterpoint from the 1347 November. He hasn't finished—of course." He glanced almost nervously at Oliver and Sue. "A wonderful example," he said quickly. "Marvellous. If you have the taste for it, of course."

Madame Hollia shuddered with ponderous delicacy. "That man!" she said. "Fascinating, of course—a great Man. But—so *advanced*!"

"It takes a connoisseur to appreciate Cenbe's work fully," Kleph said in a slightly tart voice. "We all admit that."

"Oh yes, we all bow to Cenbe," Hollia conceded. "I confess the man terrifies me a little, my dear. Do we expect him to join us?"

"I suppose so," Kleph said. "If his work—is not yet finished, then of course. You know Cenbe's tastes."

Hollia and Hara laughed together. "I know when to look for him, then," Hollia said. She glanced at the staring Oliver and the subdued but angry Sue, and with a commanding effort brought the subject back into line.

"So fortunate, my dear Kleph, to have this house," she declared heavily. "I saw a tridimensional of it—afterward—and it was still quite perfect. Such a fortunate coincidence. Would you consider parting with your lease, for a consideration? Say, a coronation seat at—"

"Nothing could buy us, Hollia," Kleph told her gaily, clasping the red box to her bosom.

Hollia gave her a cool stare. "You may change your mind, my dear Kleph," she said pontifically. "There is still time. You can always reach us through Mr. Wilson here. We have rooms up the street in the Montgomery House—nothing like yours, of course, but they will do. For us, they will do."

Oliver blinked. The Montgomery House was the most expensive hotel in town. Compared to this collapsing old ruin, it was a palace. There was no understanding these people. Their values seemed to have suffered a complete reversal.

Madame Hollia moved majestically toward the steps.

"Very pleasant to see you, my dear," she said over one well-padded shoulder. "Enjoy your stay. My regards to Omeric and Klia. Mr. Wilson—" she nodded toward the walk. "A word with you."

Oliver followed her down toward the street. Madame Hollia paused halfway there and touched his arm.

"One word of advice," she said huskily. "You say you sleep here? Move out, young man. Move out before tonight."

Oliver was searching in a half-desultory fashion for the hiding place Sue had found for the mysterious silver cube, when the first sounds from above began to drift down the stairwell toward him. Kleph had closed her door, but the house was old, and strange qualities in the noise overhead seemed to seep through the woodwork like an almost visible stain.

It was music, in a way. But much more than music. And it was a terrible sound, the sounds of calamity and of all human reaction to calamity, everything from hysteria to heartbreak, from irrational joy to rationalized acceptance.

The calamity was—single. The music did not attempt to correlate all human sorrows; it focused sharply upon one and followed the ramifications out and out. Oliver recognized these basics to the sounds in a very brief moment. They were essentials, and they seemed to beat into his brain with the first strains of the music which was so much more than music.

But when he lifted his head to listen he lost all grasp upon the meaning of the noise and it was sheer medley and confusion. To think of it was to blur it hopelessly in the mind, and he could not recapture that first instant of unreasoning acceptance.

He went upstairs almost in a daze, hardly knowing what he was doing. He

pushed Kleph's door open. He looked inside—

What he saw there he could not afterward remember except in a blurring as vague as the blurred ideas the music roused in his brain. Half the room had vanished behind a mist, and the mist was a three-dimensional screen upon which were projected—He had no words for them. He was not even sure if the projections were visual. The mist was spinning with motion and sound, but essentially it was neither sound nor motion that Oliver saw.

This was a work of art. Oliver knew no name for it. It transcended all art-forms he knew, blended them, and out of the blend produced subtleties his mind could not begin to grasp. Basically, this was the attempt of a master-composer to correlate every essential aspect of a vast human experience into something that could be conveyed in a few moments to every sense at once.

The shifting visions on the screen were not pictures in themselves, but hints of pictures, subtly selected outlines that plucked at the mind and with one deft touch set whole chords ringing through the memory. Perhaps each beholder reacted differently, since it was in the eye and the mind of the beholder that the truth of the picture lay. No two would be aware of the same symphonic panorama, but each would see essentially the same terrible story unfold.

Every sense was touched by that deft and merciless genius. Color and shape and motion flickered in the screen, hinting much, evoking unbearable memories deep in the mind; odors floated from the screen and touched the heart of the beholder more poignantly than anything visual could do. The skin crawled sometimes as if to a tangible cold hand laid upon it. The tongue curled with remembered bitterness and remembered sweet.

It was outrageous. It violated the innermost privacies of a man's mind, called up secret things long ago walled off behind mental scar tissue, forced its terrible message upon the beholder relentlessly though the mind might threaten to crack beneath the stress of it.

And yet, in spite of all this vivid awareness, Oliver did not know what calamity the screen portrayed. That it was real, vast, overwhelmingly dreadful he could not doubt. That it had once happened was unmistakable. He caught flashing glimpses of human faces distorted with grief and disease and death—real faces, faces that had once lived and were seen now in the instant

of dying. He saw men and women in rich clothing superimposed in panorama upon reeling thousands of ragged folk, great throngs of them swept past the sight in an instant, and he saw that death made no distinction among them.

He saw lovely women laugh and shake their curls, and the laughter shriek into hysteria and the hysteria into music. He saw one man's face, over and over—a long, dark, saturnine face, deeply lined, sorrowful, the face of a powerful man wise in worldliness, urbane—and helpless. That face was for awhile a recurring motif, always more tortured, more helpless than before.

The music broke off in the midst of a rising glide. The mist vanished and the room reappeared before him. The anguished dark face for an instant seemed to Oliver printed everywhere he looked, like after-vision on the eyelids. He knew that face. He had seen it before, not often, but he should know its name—

"Oliver, Oliver—" Kleph's sweet voice came out of a fog at him. He was leaning dizzily against the doorpost looking down into her eyes. She, too, had that dazed blankness he must show on his own face. The power of the dreadful symphony still held them both. But even in this confused moment Oliver saw that Kleph had been enjoying the experience.

He felt sickened to the depths of his mind, dizzy with sickness and revulsion because of the superimposing of human miseries he had just beheld. But Kleph—only appreciation showed upon her face. To her it had been magnificence, and magnificence only.

Irrelevantly Oliver remembered the nauseating candies she had enjoyed, the nauseating odors of strange food that drifted sometimes through the hall from her room.

What was it she had said downstairs a little while ago? Connoisseur, that was it. Only a connoisseur could appreciate work as—as *advanced*—as the work of someone called Cenbe.

A whiff of intoxicating sweetness curled past Oliver's face. Something cool and smooth was pressed into his hand.

"Oh, Oliver, I am so sorry." Kleph's voice murmured contritely. "Here, drink the euphoriac and you will feel better. Please drink!"

The familiar fragrance of the hot sweet tea was on his tongue before he knew he had complied. Its relaxing fumes floated up through his brain and in a moment or two the world felt stable

around him again. The room was as it had always been. And Kleph—

Her eyes were very bright. Sympathy showed in them for him, but for herself she was still brimmed with the high elation of what she had just been experiencing.

"Come and sit down," she said gently, tugging at his arm. "I am so sorry—I should not have played that over, where you could hear it. I have no excuse, really. It was only that I forgot what the effect might be on one who had never heard Cenbe's symphonies before. I was so impatient to see what he had done with . . . with his new subject. I am so very sorry, Oliver!"

"What was it?" His voice sounded steadier than he had expected. The tea was responsible for that. He sipped again, glad of the consoling euphoria its fragrance brought.

"A . . . a composite interpretation of . . . oh, Oliver, you know I must not answer questions!"

"But—"

"No—drink your tea and forget what it was you saw. Think of other things. Here, we will have music—another kind of music, something gay—"

She reached for the wall beside the window, and as before, Oliver saw the broad framed picture of blue water above the bed ripple and grow pale. Through it another scene began to dawn like shapes rising beneath the surface of the sea.

He had a glimpse of a dark-curtained stage upon which a man in a tight dark tunic and hose moved with a restless, sidelong pace, his hands and face startlingly pale against the black about him. He limped; he had a crooked back and he spoke familiar lines. Oliver had seen John Barrymore once as the Crook-Backed Richard, and it seemed vaguely outrageous to him that any other actor should essay that difficult part. This one he had never seen before, but the man had a fascinatingly smooth manner and his interpretation of the Plantagenet king was quite new and something Shakespeare probably never dreamed of.

"No," Kleph said, "not this. Nothing gloomy." And she put out her hand again. The nameless new Richard faded and there was a swirl of changing pictures and changing voices, all blurred together, before the scene steadied upon a stage-full of dancers in pastel ballet skirts, drifting effortlessly through some complicated pattern of motion. The music that went with it was light and effortless

too. The room filled up with the clear, floating melody.

Oliver set down his cup. He felt much surer of himself now, and he thought the euphoric had done all it could for him. He didn't want to blur again mentally. There were things he meant to learn about. Now. He considered how to begin.

Kleph was watching him. "That Hollia," she said suddenly. "She wants to buy the house?"

Oliver nodded. "She's offering a lot of money. Sue's going to be awfully disappointed if—" He hesitated. Perhaps, after all, Sue would not be disappointed. He remembered the little silver cube with the enigmatic function and he wondered if he should mention it to Kleph. But the euphoric had not reached that level of his brain, and he remembered his duty to Sue and was silent.

Kleph shook her head, her eyes upon his, warm with—was it sympathy?

"Believe me," she said, "you will not find that—important—after all. I promise you, Oliver."

He stared at her. "I wish you'd explain."

Kleph laughed on a note more sorrowful than amused. But it occurred to Oliver suddenly that there was no longer condescension in her voice. Imperceptibly that air of delicate amusement had vanished from her manner toward him. The cool detachment that still marked Omerie's attitude, and Klia's, was not in Kleph's any more. It was a subtlety he did not think she could assume. It had to come spontaneously or not at all. And for no reason he was willing to examine, it became suddenly very important to Oliver that Kleph should not condescend to him, that she should feel toward him as he felt toward her. He would not think of it.

He looked down at his cup, rose-quartz, exhaling a thin plume of steam from its crescent-slit opening. This time, he thought, maybe he could make the tea work for him. For he remembered how it loosened the tongue, and there was a great deal he needed to know. The idea that had come to him on the porch in the instant of silent rivalry between Kleph and Sue seemed now too fantastic to entertain. But some answer there must be.

Kleph herself gave him the opening.

"I must not take too much euphoric this afternoon," she said, smiling at him over her pink cup. "It will make me drowsy, and we are going out this evening with friends."

"More friends?" Oliver asked. "From your country?"

Kleph nodded. "Very dear friends we have expected all this week."

"I wish you'd tell me," Oliver said bluntly, "where it is you come from. It isn't from here. Your culture is too different from ours—even your names—" He broke off as Kleph shook her head.

"I wish I could tell you. But that is against all the rules. It is even against the rules for me to be here talking to you now."

"What rules?"

She made a helpless gesture. "You must not ask me, Oliver." She leaned back on the chaise longue that adjusted itself luxuriously to the motion, and smiled very sweetly at him. "We must not talk about things like that. Forget it, listen to the music, enjoy yourself if you can—" She closed her eyes and laid her head back against the cushions. Oliver saw the round tanned throat swell as she began to hum a tune. Eyes still closed, she sang again the words she had sung upon the stairs. "*Come hider, love, to me*—"

A memory clicked over suddenly in Oliver's mind. He had never heard the queer, lagging tune before, but he thought he knew the words. He remembered what Hollia's husband had said when he heard that line of song, and he leaned forward. She would not answer a direct question, but perhaps—

"Was the weather this warm in Canterbury?" he asked, and held his breath. Kleph hummed another line of the song and shook her head, eyes still closed.

"It was autumn there," she said. "But bright, wonderfully bright. Even their clothing, you know . . . everyone was singing that new song, and I can't get it out of my head." She sang another line, and the words were almost unintelligible—English, yet not an English Oliver could understand.

He stood up. "Wait," he said. "I want to find something. Back in a minute."

She opened her eyes and smiled mistily at him, still humming. He went downstairs as fast as he could—the stairway swayed a little, though his head was nearly clear now—and into the library. The book he wanted was old and battered, interlined with the penciled notes of his college days. He did not remember very clearly where the passage he wanted was, but he thumbed fast through the columns and by sheer luck found it within a few minutes. Then he went back upstairs, feeling a strange emptiness in

his stomach because of what he almost believed now.

"Kleph," he said firmly, "I know that song. I know the year it was new."

Her lids rose slowly; she looked at him through a mist of euphoric. He was not sure she had understood. For a long moment she held him with her gaze. Then she put out one downy-sleeved arm and spread her tanned fingers toward him. She laughed deep in her throat.

"*Come hider, love, to me*," she said.

He crossed the room slowly, took her hand. The fingers closed warmly about his. She pulled him down so that he had to kneel beside her. Her other arm lifted. Again she laughed, very softly, and closed her eyes, lifting her face to his.

The kiss was warm and long. He caught something of her own euphoria from the fragrance of the tea breathed into his face. And he was startled at the end of the kiss, when the clasp of her arms loosened about his neck, to feel the sudden rush of her breath against his cheek. There were tears on her face, and the sound she made was a sob.

He held her off and looked down in amazement. She sobbed once more, caught a deep breath, and said, "Oh, Oliver, Oliver—" Then she shook her head and pulled free, turning away to hide her face. "I . . . I am sorry," she said unevenly. "Please forgive me. It does not matter . . . I know it does not matter . . . but—"

"What's wrong? What doesn't matter?"

"Nothing. Nothing . . . please forget it. Nothing at all." She got a handkerchief from the table and blew her nose, smiling at him with an effect of radiance through the tears.

Suddenly he was very angry. He had heard enough evasions and mystifying half-truths. He said roughly, "Do you think I'm crazy? I know enough now to—"

"Oliver, please!" She held up her own cup, steaming fragrantly. "Please, no more questions. Here, euphoria is what you need, Oliver. Euphoria, not answers."

"What year was it when you heard that song in Canterbury?" he demanded, pushing the cup aside.

She blinked at him, tears bright on her lashes. "Why . . . what year do you think?"

"I know," Oliver told her grimly. "I know the year that song was popular. I know you just came from Canterbury—Hollia's husband said so. It's May now, but it was autumn in Canterbury, and you just came from there, so lately the

song you heard is still running through your head. Chaucer's Pardoner sang that song sometime around the end of the fourteenth century. Did you see Chaucer, Kleph? What was it like in England that long ago?"

Kleph's eyes fixed his for a silent moment. Then her shoulders drooped and her whole body went limp with resignation beneath the soft blue robe. "I am a fool," she said gently. "It must have been easy to trap me. You really believe—what you say?"

Oliver nodded.

She said in a low voice, "Few people do believe it. That is one of our maxims, when we travel. We are safe from much suspicion because people before The Travel began will not believe."

The emptiness in Oliver's stomach suddenly doubled in volume. For an instant the bottom dropped out of time itself and the universe was unsteady about him. He felt sick. He felt naked and helpless. There was a buzzing in his ears and the room dimmed before him.

He had not really believed—not until this instant. He had expected some rational explanation from her that would tidy all his wild half-thoughts and suspicions into something a man could accept as believable. Not this.

Kleph dabbed at her eyes with the pale-blue handkerchief and smiled tremulously.

"I know," she said. "It must be a terrible thing to accept. To have all your concepts turned upside down—We know it from childhood, of course, but for you . . . here, Oliver. The euphoric will make it easier."

He took the cup, the faint stain of her lip rouge still on the crescent opening. He drank, feeling the dizzy sweetness spiral through his head, and his brain turned a little in his skull as the volatile fragrance took effect. With that turning, focus shifted and all his values with it.

He began to feel better. The flesh settled on his bones again, and the warm clothing of temporal assurance settled upon his flesh, and he was no longer naked and reeling in the vortex of unstable time.

"The story is very simple, really," Kleph said. "We—travel. Our own time is not terribly far ahead of yours. No, I must not say how far. But we still remember your songs and poets and some of your great actors. We are a people of much leisure, and we cultivate the art of enjoying ourselves.

"This is a tour we are making—a tour

of a year's seasons. Vintage seasons. The autumn in Canterbury was the most magnificent autumn our researchers could discover anywhere. We rode in a pilgrimage to the shrine—it was a wonderful experience, though the clothing was a little hard to manage.

"Now this month of May is almost over—the loveliest May in recorded times. A perfect May in a wonderful period. You have no way of knowing what a good, gay period you live in, Oliver. The very feeling in the air of the cities—that wonderful national confidence and happiness—everything going as smoothly as a dream. There were other Mays with fine weather, but each of them had a war or a famine or something else wrong." She hesitated, grimaced and went on rapidly. "In a few days we are to meet at a coronation in Rome," she said. "I think the year will be 800—Christmastime. We —"

"But why," Oliver interrupted "did you insist on this house? Why do others want to get it away from you?"

Kleph stared at him. He saw the tears rising again in small bright crescents that gathered above her lower lids. He saw the look of obstinacy that came upon her soft, tanned face. She shook her head.

"You must not ask me that." She held out the steaming cup. "Here, drink and forget what I have said. I can tell you no more. No more at all."

When he woke, for a little while he had no idea where he was. He did not remember leaving Kleph or coming to his own room. He didn't care, just then. For he woke to a sense of overwhelming terror.

The dark was full of it. His brain rocked on waves of fear and pain. He lay motionless, too frightened to stir, some atavistic memory warning him to lie quiet until he knew from which direction the danger threatened. Reasonless panic broke over him in a tidal flow; his head ached with its violence and the dark throbbed to the same rhythms.

A knock sounded at the door. Omerie's deep voice said, "Wilson! Wilson, are you awake?"

Oliver tried twice before he had breath to answer. "Y-yes—what is it?"

The knob rattled. Omerie's dim figure groped for the light switch and the room sprang into visibility. Omerie's face was drawn with strain, and he held one hand to his head as if it ached in rhythm with Oliver's.

It was in that moment, before Omerie spoke again, that Oliver remembered

Hollia's warning. "Move out, young man—move out before tonight." Wildly he wondered what threatened them all in this dark house that throbbed with the rhythms of pure terror.

Omerie in an angry voice answered the unspoken question.

"Someone has planted a subsonic in the house, Wilson. Kleph thinks you may know where it is."

"S-subsonic?"

"Call it a gadget," Omerie interpreted impatiently. "Probably a small metal box that—"

Oliver said, "Oh," in a tone that must have told Omerie everything.

"Where is it?" he demanded. "Quick. Let's get this over."

"I d-don't know." With an effort Oliver controlled the chattering of his teeth. "Y-you mean all this—all this is just from the little box?"

"Of course. Now tell me how to find it before we all go crazy."

Oliver got shakily out of bed, groping for his robe with nerveless hands. "I s-suppose she hid it somewhere downstairs," he said. "S-she wasn't gone long."

Omerie got the story out of him in a few brief questions. He clicked his teeth in exasperation when Oliver had finished it.

"That stupid Hollia—"

"Omerie!" Kleph's plaintive voice wailed from the hall. "Please hurry, Omerie! This is too much to stand! Oh, Omerie, please!"

Oliver stood up abruptly. Then a re-doubled wave of the inexplicable pain seemed to explode in his skull at the motion, and he clutched the bedpost and reeled.

"Go find the thing yourself," he heard himself saying dizzily. "I can't even walk—"

Omerie's own temper was drawn wire-tight by the pressure in the room. He seized Oliver's shoulder and shook him, saying in a tight voice, "You let it in—now help us get it out, or—"

"It's a gadget out of your world, not mine!" Oliver said furiously.

And then it seemed to him there was a sudden coldness and silence in the room. Even the pain and the senseless terror paused for a moment. Omerie's pale, cold eyes fixed upon Oliver a stare so chill he could almost feel the ice in it. "What do you know about our—world?" Omerie demanded.

Oliver did not speak a word. He did not need to; his face must have betrayed what he knew. He was beyond concealment in the stress of this nighttime terror he still could not understand.

Omerie bared his white teeth and said three perfectly unintelligible words. Then he stepped to the door and snapped, "Kleph!"

Oliver could see the two women huddled together in the hall, shaking violently with involuntary waves of that strange, synthetic terror. Klia, in a luminous green gown, was rigid with control, but Kleph made no effort whatever at repression. Her downy robe had turned soft gold tonight; she shivered in it and the tears ran down her face unchecked.

"Kleph," Omerie said in a dangerous voice, "you were euphoric again yesterday?"

Kleph darted a scared glance at Oliver and nodded guiltily.

"You talked too much." It was a complete indictment in one sentence. "You know the rules, Kleph. You will not be allowed to travel again if anyone reports this to the authorities."

Kleph's lovely creamy face creased suddenly into impenitent dimples.

"I know it was wrong. I am very sorry—but you will not stop me if Cenbe says no."

Klia flung out her arms in a gesture of helpless anger. Omerie shrugged. "In this case, as it happens, no great harm is done," he said, giving Oliver an unfathomable glance. "But it might have been serious. Next time perhaps it will be. I must have a talk with Cenbe."

"We must find the subsonic first of all," Klia reminded them, shivering. "If Kleph is afraid to help, she can go out for awhile. I confess I am very sick of Kleph's company just now."

"We could give up the house!" Kleph cried wildly. "Let Hollia have it! How can you stand this long enough to hunt—"

"Give up the house?" Klia echoed. "You must be mad! With all our invitations out?"

"There will be no need for that," Omerie said. "We can find it if we all hunt. You feel able to help?" He looked at Oliver.

With an effort Oliver controlled his own senseless panic as the waves of it swept through the room. "Yes," he said. "But what about me? What are you going to do?"

"That should be obvious," Omerie said, his pale eyes in the dark face regarding Oliver impassively. "Keep you in the house until we go. We can certainly do no less. You understand that. And there is no reason for us to do more, as it happens. Silence is all we need to impose.

It is all we promised when we signed our travel papers."

"But—" Oliver groped for the fallacy in that reasoning. It was no use. He could not think clearly. Panic surged insanely through his mind from the very air around him. "All right," he said. "Let's hunt."

It was dawn before they found the box, tucked inside the ripped seam of a sofa cushion. Omerie took it upstairs without a word. Five minutes later the pressure in the air abruptly dropped and peace fell blissfully upon the house.

"They will try again," Omerie said to Oliver at the door of the back bedroom. "We must watch for that. As for you, I must see that you remain in the house until Friday. For your own comfort, I advise you to let me know if Hollia offers any further tricks. I confess I am not quite sure how to enforce your staying indoors. I could use methods that would make you very uncomfortable. I would prefer to accept your word on it."

Oliver hesitated. The relaxing of pressure upon his brain had left him exhausted and stupid, and he was not at all sure what to say.

Omerie went on after a moment. "It was partly our fault for not insuring that we have the house to ourselves," he said. "Living here with us, you could scarcely help suspecting. Shall we say that in return for your promise, I reimburse you in part for losing the sale price on this house?"

Oliver thought that over. It would pacify Sue a little. And it meant only two days indoors. Besides, what good would escaping do? What could he say to outsiders that would not lead him straight to a padded cell?

"All right," he said wearily. "I promise."

By Friday morning there was still no sign from Hollia. Sue telephoned at noon. Oliver knew the crackle of her voice over the wire when Kleph took the call. Even the crackle sounded hysterical; Sue saw her bargain slipping hopelessly through her grasping little fingers.

Kleph's voice was soothing. "I am sorry," she said many times, in the intervals when the voice paused. "I am truly sorry. Believe me, you will find it does not matter. I know . . . I am sorry—"

She turned from the phone at last. "The girl says Hollia has given up," she told the others.

"Not Hollia," Klia said firmly.

Omerie shrugged. "We have very little

time left. If she intends anything more, it will be tonight. We must watch for it."

"Oh, not tonight!" Kleph's voice was horrified. "Not even Hollia would do that!"

"Hollia, my dear, in her own way is quite as unscrupulous as you are," Omerie told her with a smile.

"But—would she spoil things for us just because she can't be here?"

"What do you think?" Klia demanded.

Oliver ceased to listen. There was no making sense out of their talk, but he knew that by tonight whatever the secret was must surely come into the open at last. He was willing to wait and see.

For two days excitement had been building up in the house and the three who shared it with him. Even the servants felt it, and were nervous and unsure of themselves. Oliver had given up asking questions—it only embarrassed his tenants—and watched.

All the chairs in the house were collected in the three front bedrooms. The furniture was rearranged to make room for them, and dozens of covered cups had been set out on trays. Oliver recognized Kleph's rose-quartz set among the rest. No steam rose from the thin crescent-openings, but the cups were full. Oliver lifted one and felt a heavy liquid move within it, like something half-solid, sluggishly.

Guests were obviously expected, but the regular dinner hour of nine came and went, and no one had yet arrived. Dinner was finished; the servants went home. The Sanciscoes went to their rooms to dress, amid a feeling of mounting tension.

Oliver stepped out on the porch after dinner, trying in vain to guess what it was that had wrought such a pitch of expectancy in the house. There was a quarter moon swimming in haze on the horizon, but the stars which had made every night of May this far a dazzling translucency, were very dim tonight. Clouds had begun to gather at sundown, and the undimmed weather of the whole month seemed ready to break at last.

Behind Oliver the door opened a little, and closed. He caught Kleph's fragrance before he turned, and a faint whiff of the fragrance of the euphoric she was much too fond of drinking. She came to his side and slipped a hand into his, looking up into his face in the darkness.

"Oliver," she said very softly. "Promise me one thing. Promise me not to leave the house tonight."

"I've already promised that," he said a little irritably.

"I know. But tonight—I have a very particular reason for wanting you indoors tonight." She leaned her head against his shoulder for a moment, and despite himself his irritation softened. He had not seen Kleph alone since that last night of her revelations; he supposed he never would be alone with her again for more than a few minutes at a time. But he knew he would not forget those two bewildering evenings. He knew, too, now, that she was very weak and foolish—but she was still Kleph and he had held her in his arms, and was not likely ever to forget it.

"You might be—hurt—if you went out tonight," she was saying in a muffled voice. "I know it will not matter, in the end, but—remember you promised, Oliver."

She was gone again, and the door had closed behind her, before he could voice the futile questions in his mind.

The guests began to arrive just before midnight. From the head of the stairs Oliver saw them coming in by twos and threes, and was astonished at how many of these people from the future must have gathered here in the past weeks. He could see quite clearly now how they differed from the norm of his own period. Their physical elegance was what one noticed first—perfect grooming, meticulous manners, meticulously controlled voices. But because they were all idle, all, in a way, sensation-hunters, there was a certain shrillness underlying their voices, especially when heard all together. Petulance and self-indulgence showed beneath the good manners. And tonight, an all-pervasive excitement.

By one o'clock everyone had gathered in the front rooms. The teacups had begun to steam, apparently of themselves, around midnight, and the house was full of the faint, thin fragrance that induced a sort of euphoria all through the rooms, breathed in with the perfume of the tea.

It made Oliver feel light and drowsy. He was determined to sit up as long as the others did, but he must have dozed off in his own room, by the window, an unopened book in his lap.

For when it happened he was not sure for a few minutes whether or not it was a dream.

The vast, incredible crash was louder than sound. He felt the whole house shake under him, felt rather than heard the timbers grind upon one another like broken bones, while he was still in the borderland of sleep. When he woke fully

he was on the floor among the shattered fragments of the window.

How long or short a time he had lain there he did not know. The world was still stunned with that tremendous noise, or his ears still deaf from it, for there was no sound anywhere.

He was halfway down the hall toward the front rooms when sound began to return from outside. It was a low, indescribable rumble at first, prickled with countless tiny distant screams. Oliver's eardrums ached from the terrible impact of the vast unheard noise, but the numbness was wearing off and he heard before he saw it the first voices of the stricken city.

The door to Kleph's room resisted him for a moment. The house had settled a little from the violence of the—the explosion?—and the frame was out of line. When he got the door open he could only stand blinking stupidly into the darkness within. All the lights were out, but there was a breathless sort of whispering going on in many voices.

The chairs were drawn around the broad front windows so that everyone could see out; the air swam with the fragrance of euphoria. There was light enough here from outside for Oliver to see that a few onlookers still had their hands to their ears, but all were craning eagerly forward to see.

Through a dreamlike haze Oliver saw the city spread out with impossible distinctness below the window. He knew quite well that a row of houses across the street blocked the view—yet he was looking over the city now, and he could see it in a limitless panorama from here to the horizon. The houses between had vanished.

On the far skyline fire was already a solid mass, painting the low clouds crimson. That sulphurous light reflecting back from the sky upon the city made clear the rows upon rows of flattened houses with flame beginning to lick up among them, and farther out the formless rubble of what had been houses a few minutes ago and was nothing at all.

The city had begun to be vocal. The noise of the flames rose loudest, but you could hear a rumble of human voices like the beat of surf a long way off, and the staccato noises of screaming made a sort of pattern that came and went continuously through the web of sound. Threading it in undulating waves the shrieks of sirens knit the web together into a terrible symphony that had, in its way, a strange, inhuman beauty.

Briefly through Oliver's stunned in-

credulity went the memory of that other symphony Kleph had played here one day, another catastrophe retold in terms of music and moving shapes.

He said hoarsely, "Kleph—"

The tableau by the window broke. Every head turned, and Oliver saw the faces of strangers staring at him, some few in embarrassment avoiding his eyes, but most seeking them out with that avid, inhuman curiosity which is common to a type in all crowds at accident scenes. But these people were here by design, audience at a vast disaster timed almost for their coming.

Kleph got up unsteadily, her velvet dinner gown tripping her as she rose. She set down a cup and swayed a little as she came toward the door, saying, "Oliver . . . Oliver—" in a sweet, uncertain voice. She was drunk, he saw, and wrought up by the catastrophe to a pitch of stimulation in which she was not very sure what she was doing.

Oliver heard himself saying in a thin voice not his own, "W-what was it, Kleph? What happened? What—" But *happened* seemed so inadequate a word for the incredible panorama below that he had to choke back hysterical laughter upon the struggling questions, and broke off entirely, trying to control the shaking that had seized his body.

Kleph made an unsteady stoop and seized a steaming cup. She came to him, swaying, holding it out—her panacea for all ills.

"Here, drink it, Oliver—we are all quite safe here, quite safe." She thrust the cup to his lips and he gulped automatically, grateful for the fumes that began their slow, coiling surcease in his brain with the first swallow.

"It was a meteor," Kleph was saying. "Quite a small meteor, really. We are perfectly safe here. This house was never touched."

Out of some cell of the unconscious Oliver heard himself saying incoherently, "Sue? Is Sue—" he could not finish.

Kleph thrust the cup at him again. "I think she may be safe—for awhile. Please, Oliver—forget about all that and drink."

"But you *knew*!" Realization of that came belatedly to his stunned brain. "You could have given warning, or—"

"How could we change the past?" Kleph asked. "We knew—but could we stop the meteor? Or warn the city? Before we come we must give our word never to interfere—"

Their voices had risen imperceptibly to be audible above the rising volume of

sound from below. The city was roaring now, with flames and cries and the crash of falling buildings. Light in the room turned lurid and pulsed upon the walls and ceiling in red light and redder dark.

Downstairs a door slammed. Someone laughed. It was high, hoarse, angry laughter. Then from the crowd in the room someone gasped and there was a chorus of dismayed cries. Oliver tried to focus upon the window and the terrible panorama beyond, and found he could not.

It took several seconds of determined blinking to prove that more than his own vision was at fault. Kleph whimpered softly and moved against him. His arms closed about her automatically, and he was grateful for the warm, solid flesh against him. This much at least he could touch and be sure of, though everything else that was happening might be a dream. Her perfume and the heady perfume of the tea rose together in his head, and for an instant, holding her in this embrace that must certainly be the last time he ever held her, he did not care that something had gone terribly wrong with the very air of the room.

It was blindness—not continuous, but a series of swift, widening ripples between which he could catch glimpses of the other faces in the room, strained and astonished in the flickering light from the city.

The ripples came faster. There was only a blink of sight between them now, and the blinks grew briefer and briefer, the intervals of darkness more broad.

From downstairs the laughter rose again up the stairwell. Oliver thought he knew the voice. He opened his mouth to speak, but a door nearby slammed open before he could find his tongue, and Omerie shouted down the stairs.

"Hollia?" he roared above the roaring of the city. "Hollia, is that you?"

She laughed again, triumphantly. "I warned you!" her hoarse, harsh voice called: "Now come out in the street with the rest of us if you want to see any more!"

"Hollia!" Omerie shouted desperately. "Stop this or—"

The laughter was derisive. "What will you do, Omerie? This time I hid it too well—come down in the street if you want to watch the rest."

There was angry silence in the house. Oliver could feel Kleph's quick, excited breathing light upon his cheek, feel the soft motions of her body in his arms. He tried consciously to make the moment last, stretch it out to infinity. Everything

had happened too swiftly to impress very clearly on his mind anything except what he could touch and hold. He held her in an embrace made consciously light, though he wanted to clasp her in a tight, despairing grip, because he was sure this was the last embrace they would ever share.

The eye-straining blinks of light and blindness went on. From far away below the roar of the burning city rolled on, threaded together by the long, looped cadences of the sirens that linked all sounds into one.

Then in the bewildering dark another voice sounded from the hall downstairs. A man's voice, very deep, very melodious, saying:

"What is this? What are you doing here? Holliä—is that you?"

Oliver felt Kleph stiffen in his arms. She caught her breath, but she said nothing in the instant while heavy feet began to mount the stairs, coming up with a solid, confident tread that shook the old house to each step.

Then Kleph thrust herself hard out of Oliver's arms. He heard her high, sweet, excited voice crying, "Cenbe! Cenbe!" and she ran to meet the newcomer through the waves of dark and light that swept the shaken house.

Oliver staggered a little and felt a chair seat catching the back of his legs. He sank into it and lifted to his lips the cup he still held. Its steam was warm and moist in his face, though he could scarcely make out the shape of the rim.

He lifted it with both hands and drank.

When he opened his eyes it was quite dark in the room. Also it was silent except for a thin, melodious humming almost below the threshold of sound. Oliver struggled with the memory of a monstrous nightmare. He put it resolutely out of his mind and sat up, feeling an unfamiliar bed creak and sway under him.

This was Kleph's room. But no—Kleph's no longer. Her shining hangings were gone from the walls, her white resilient rug, her pictures. The room looked as it had looked before she came, except for one thing.

In the far corner was a table—a block of translucent stuff—out of which light poured softly. A man sat on a low stool before it, leaning forward, his heavy shoulders outlined against the glow. He wore earphones and he was making quick, erratic notes upon a pad on his knee, swaying a little as if to the tune of unheard music.

The curtains were drawn, but from beyond them came a distant, muffled roaring that Oliver remembered from his nightmare. He put a hand to his face, aware of a feverish warmth and a dipping of the room before his eyes. His head ached, and there was a deep malaise in every limb and nerve.

As the bed creaked, the man in the corner turned, sliding the earphones down like a collar. He had a strong, sensitive face above a dark beard, trimmed short. Oliver had never seen him before, but he had that air Oliver knew so well by now, of remoteness which was the knowledge of time itself lying like a gulf between them.

When he spoke his deep voice was impersonally kind.

"You had too much euphoriac, Wilson," he said, aloofly sympathetic. "You slept a long while."

"How long?" Oliver's throat felt sticky when he spoke.

The man did not answer. Oliver shook his head experimentally. He said, "I thought Kleph said you don't get hang-overs from—" Then another thought interrupted the first, and he said quickly, "Where is Kleph?" He looked confusedly toward the door.

"They should be in Rome by now. Watching Charlemagne's coronation at St. Peter's on Christmas Day a thousand years from here."

That was not a thought Oliver could grasp clearly. His aching brain sheered away from it; he found thinking at all was strangely difficult. Staring at the man, he traced an idea painfully to its conclusion.

"So they've gone on—but you stayed behind. Why? You . . . you're Cenbe? I heard your—symphonia, Kleph called it."

"You heard part of it. I have not finished yet. I needed—this." Cenbe inclined his head toward the curtains beyond which the subdued roaring still went on.

"You needed—the meteor?" The knowledge worked painfully through his dulled brain until it seemed to strike some area still untouched by the aching, an area still alive to implication. "*The meteor?* But—"

There was a power implicit in Cenbe's raised hand that seemed to push Oliver down upon the bed again. Cenbe said patiently, "The worst if it is past now, for awhile. Forget it if you can. That was days ago. I said you were asleep for some time. I let you rest. I knew this

house would be safe—from the fire at least."

"Then—something more's to come?" Oliver only mumbled his question. He was not sure he wanted an answer. He had been curious so long, and now that knowledge lay almost within reach, something about his brain seemed to refuse to listen. Perhaps this weariness, this feverish, dizzy feeling would pass as the effect of the euphoric wore off.

Cenbe's voice ran on smoothly, soothingly, almost as if Cenbe too did not want him to think. It was easiest to lie here and listen.

"I am a composer," Cenbe was saying. "I happen to be interested in interpreting certain forms of disaster into my own terms. That is why I stayed on. The others were dilettantes. They came for the May weather and the spectacle. The aftermath—well why should they wait for that? As for myself—I suppose I am a connoisseur. I find the aftermath rather fascinating. And I need it. I need to study it at first hand, for my own purposes."

His eyes dwelt upon Oliver for an instant very keenly, like a physician's eyes, impersonal and observant. Absently he reached for his stylus and the note pad. And as he moved, Oliver saw a familiar mark on the underside of the thick, tanned wrist.

"Kleph had that scar, too," he heard himself whisper. "And the others."

Cenbe nodded. "Inoculation. It was necessary, under the circumstances. We did not want disease to spread in our own time-world."

"Disease?"

Cenbe shrugged. "You would not recognize the name."

"But, if you can inoculate against disease—" Oliver thrust himself up on an aching arm. He had a half-grasp upon a thought now which he did not want to let go. Effort seemed to make the ideas come more clearly through his mounting confusion. With enormous effort he went on.

"I'm getting it now," he said. "Wait. I've been trying to work this out. You can change history? You can! I know you can. Kleph said she had to promise not to interfere. You all had to promise. Does that mean you really could change your own past—our time?"

Cenbe laid down his pad again. He looked at Oliver thoughtfully, a dark, intent look under heavy brows. "Yes," he said. "Yes, the past can be changed, but not easily. And it changes the future, too, necessarily. The lines of probability are switched into new patterns—but it is ex-

tremely difficult, and it has never been allowed. The physio-temporal course tends to slide back to its norm, always. That is why it is so hard to force any alteration." He shrugged. "A theoretical science. We do not change history, Wilson. If we changed our past, our present would be altered, too. And our time-world is entirely to our liking. There may be a few malcontents there, but they are not allowed the privilege of temporal travel."

Oliver spoke louder against the roaring from beyond the windows. "But you've got the power! You could alter history, if you wanted to—wipe out all the pain and suffering and tragedy—"

"All of that passed away long ago," Cenbe said.

"Not—now! Not—this!"

Cenbe looked at him enigmatically for a while. Then— "This, too," he said.

And suddenly Oliver realized from across what distances Cenbe was watching him. A vast distance, as time is measured. Cenbe was a composer and a genius, and necessarily strongly emphatic, but his psychic locus was very far away in time. The dying city outside, the whole world of *now* was not quite real to Cenbe, falling short of reality because of that basic variance in time. It was merely one of the building blocks that had gone to support the edifice on which Cenbe's culture stood in a misty, unknown, terrible future.

It seemed terrible to Oliver now. Even Kleph—all of them had been touched with a pettiness, the faculty that had enabled Holliia to concentrate on her malicious, small schemes to acquire a ringside seat while the meteor thundered in toward Earth's atmosphere. They were all dilettantes, Kleph and Omerie and the others. They toured time, but only as onlookers. Were they bored—sated—with their normal existence?

Not sated enough to wish change, basically. Their own time-world was a fulfilled womb, a perfection made manifest for their needs. They dared not change the past—they could not risk flawing their own present.

Revelation shook him. Remembering the touch of Kleph's lips, he felt a sour sickness on his tongue. Alluring she had been; he knew that too well. But the aftermath—

There was something wrong about this race from the future. He had felt it dimly at first, before Kleph's nearness had drowned caution and buffered his sensibilities. Time traveling purely as an

escape mechanism seemed almost blasphemous. A race with such power—

Kleph—leaving him for the barbaric, splendid coronation at Rome a thousand years ago—*how had she seen him?* Not as a living, breathing man. He knew that, very certainly. Kleph's race were spectators.

But he read more than casual interest in Cenbe's eyes now. There was an avidity there, a bright, fascinated probing. The man had replaced his earphones—he was different from the others. He was a connoisseur. After the vintage season came the aftermath—and Cenbe.

Cenbe watched and waited, light flickering softly in the translucent black before him, his fingers poised over the note pad. The ultimate connoisseur waited to savor the rarities that no non-gourmet could appreciate.

Those thin, distant rhythms of sound that was almost music began to be audible again above the noises of the distant fire. Listening, remembering, Oliver could very nearly catch the pattern of the symphonia as he had heard it, all intermingled with the flash of changing faces and the rank upon rank of the dying—

He lay back on the bed letting the room swirl away into the darkness behind his closed and aching lids. The ache was implicit in every cell of his body, almost a second ego taking possession and driving him out of himself, a strong, sure ego taking over as he himself let go.

Why, he wondered dully, should Kleph have lied? She had said there was no aftermath to the drink she had given him. No aftermath—and yet this painful possession was strong enough to edge him out of his own body.

Kleph had not lied. It was no aftermath to drink. He knew that—but the knowledge no longer touched his brain or his body. He lay still, giving them up to the power of the illness which was aftermath to something far stronger than the strongest drink. The illness that had no name—yet.

Cenbe's new symphonia was a crowning triumph. It had its premiere from

Antares Hall, and the applause was an ovation. History itself, of course, was the artist—opening with the meteor that forecast the great plagues of the fourteenth century and closing with the climax Cenbe had caught on the threshold of modern times. But only Cenbe could have interpreted it with such subtle power.

Critics spoke of the masterly way in which he had chosen the face of the Stuart king as a recurrent motif against the montage of emotion and sound and movement. But there were other faces, fading through the great sweep of the composition, which helped to build up to the tremendous climax. One face in particular, one moment that the audience absorbed greedily. A moment in which one man's face loomed huge in the screen, every feature clear. Cenbe had never caught an emotional crisis so effectively, the critics agreed. You could almost read the man's eyes.

After Cenbe had left, he lay motionless for a long while. He was thinking feverishly—

I've got to find some way to tell people. If I'd known in advance, maybe something could have been done. We'd have forced them to tell us how to change the probabilities. We could have evacuated the city.

If I could leave a message—

Maybe not for to-day's people. But later. They visit all through time. If they could be recognized and caught somewhere, sometime, and made to change destiny—

It wasn't easy to stand up. The room kept tilting. But he managed it. He found pencil and paper and through the swaying of the shadows he wrote down what he could. Enough. Enough to warn, enough to save.

He put the sheets on the table, in plain sight, and weighted them down before he stumbled back to bed through closing darkness.

The house was dynamited six days later, part of the futile attempt to halt the relentless spread of the Blue Death.



EVIDENCE

By ISAAC ASIMOV

You know, it would be mighty hard to get evidence that a robot claiming it was a man, was not. As a man, he'd have rights of privacy, and until you proved otherwise—

FRANCIS QUINN was a politician of the new school. That, of course, is a meaningless expression, as are all expressions of the sort. Most of the "new schools" we have were duplicated in the social life of ancient Greece, and perhaps, if we knew more about it, in the social life of ancient Sumeria and in the lake dwellings of prehistoric Switzerland as well.

But, to get out from under what promises to be a dull and complicated beginning, it might be best to state hastily that Quinn neither ran for office nor canvassed for votes, made no speeches and stuffed no ballot boxes. Any more than Napoleon pulled a trigger at Austerlitz.

And since politics makes strange bed-fellows—an expression not originating with me—Alfred Lanning, director of the engineering end of U.S. Robots & Mechanical Men Corporation, sat at the other side of the desk with his ferocious white eyebrows bent far forward over eyes in which chronic impatience had sharpened to acuity. He was not pleased.

The fact, if known to Quinn, would have annoyed him not the least. His voice was friendly, perhaps professionally so.

"I assume you know Stephen Byerley, Dr. Lanning."

"I have heard of him. So have many people."

"Yes, so have I. Perhaps you intend voting for him at the next election."

"I couldn't say." There was an unmistakable trace of acidity here. "I have not followed the political currents, so I'm not aware that he is running for office."

"He may be our next mayor, and thereafter the regional governor of the American Union—and even global coordinator, some day. It's a fascinating prospect. Of course, he is only district attorney now, but great oaks—"

"Yes," interrupted Lanning, "I have heard the phrase before. But I wonder if we can get to the business at hand."

"We are at the business at hand, Dr. Lanning." Quinn's tone was very gentle. "It is to my interest to keep Mr. Byerley a district attorney at the very most, and it is to your interest to help me do so."

"To my interest? Come!" Lanning's eyebrows hunched low.

"Well, say then to the interest of the U.S. Robot & Mechanical Men Corporation, and so yours as well. In fact, I might go to the head of the company directly. I think you wouldn't want me to."

Dr. Lanning was silent a moment, chewing the cud of his thoughts. He said more softly, "I don't follow you at all, Mr. Quinn."

"I am not surprised, Dr. Lanning. But it's all rather simple. Do you mind?" Quinn lit a slender cigarette with a lighter of tasteful simplicity and his big-boned face settled into an expression of quiet amusement. "We have spoken of Mr. Byerley—a strange and colorful character. He was unknown three years ago. He is very well-known now. He is a man of force and ability, and certainly the most capable and intelligent prosecutor I have ever known. Unfortunately he is not a friend of mine—"

"I understand," said Lanning, mechanically. He stared at his fingernails.

"I have had occasion," continued Quinn, evenly, "in the past year to investigate Mr. Byerley—quite exhaustively. It is always useful, you see, to subject the past life of reform politicians to rather inquisitive research. If you knew how often it helped—" He paused to smile humorlessly at the glowing tip of his cigarette. "But Mr. Quinn's past is unremarkable. A quiet life in a small town, a college education, a wife who died young, an auto accident with a slow recovery, law school, coming to the metropolis, an attorney."

Francis Quinn shook his head slowly, then added, "But his present life. Ah, that is remarkable. Our district attorney never eats!"

Lanning's head snapped up, old eyes, surprisingly sharp, "Pardon me?"

"Our district attorney never eats." The repetition thumped by syllables. "I'll modify that slightly. He has never been seen to eat or drink. Never! Do you understand the significance of the word? Not rarely, but never!"

"I find that quite incredible. Can you trust your investigators?"

"I can trust my investigators, and I don't find it incredible at all. Further, our district attorney has never been seen to drink—in the aqueous sense as well as the alcoholic—nor to sleep. There are other factors, but I should think I have made my point."

Lanning leaned back in his seat, and there was the rapt silence of challenge and response between them, and then the old roboticist shook his head. "No. There is only one thing you can be trying to imply, if I couple your statements with the fact that you present them to me, and that is impossible."

"But the man is quite inhuman, Dr. Lanning."

"If you told me he was Satan in masquerade, there would be a faint chance that I might believe you."

"I tell you he is a robot, Dr. Lanning."

"I tell you it is as impossible a conception as I have ever heard, Mr. Quinn." Again the combative silence.

"Nevertheless," and Quinn stubbed out his cigarette with elaborate care, "you will have to investigate this impossibility with all the resources of the Corporation."

"I'm sure that I could undertake no such thing, Mr. Quinn. You don't seriously suggest that the Corporation take part in local politics."

"You have no choice. Supposing I were to make my facts public without proof. The evidence is circumstantial enough."

"Suit yourself in that respect."

"But it would not suit me. Proof would be much preferable. And it would not suit *you*, for the publicity would be very damaging to your company. You are perfectly well acquainted, I suppose, with the strict rules against the use of robots on inhabited worlds."

"Certainly!"—brusquely.

"You know that the U.S. Robot & Mechanical Men Corporation is the only manufacturer of positronic robots in the Solar System, and if Byerley is a robot, he is a *positronic* robot. You are also aware that all positronic robots are leased, and not sold; that the Corporation remains the owner and manager of each robot, and is therefore responsible for the actions of all."

"It is an easy matter, Mr. Quinn, to prove the Corporation has never manufactured a robot of a humanoid character."

"It can be done? To discuss merely possibilities."

"Yes. It can be done."

"Secretly, I imagine, as well. Without entering it in your books."

"Not the positronic brain, sir. Too many factors are involved in that, and there is the tightest possible government supervision."

"Yes, but robots are worn out, break down, go out of order—and are dismantled."

"And the positronic brains re-used or destroyed."

"Really?" Francis Quinn allowed himself a trace of sarcasm. "And if one were, accidentally, of course, not destroyed—and there happened to be a humanoid structure waiting for a brain."

"Impossible!"

"You would have to prove that to the government and the public, so why not prove it to me now."

"But what could our purpose be?" demanded Lanning in exasperation. "Where is our motivation? Credit us with a minimum of sense."

"My dear sir, please. The Corporation would be only too glad to have the Global Council permit the use of humanoid positronic robots on inhabited worlds. The profits would be enormous. But the prejudice of the public against such a practice is too great. Suppose you get them used to such robots first—see, we have a skillful lawyer, a good mayor, a wonderful co-ordinator—and he is a robot. Won't you buy our robot butlers?"

"Thoroughly fantastic. An almost humorous descent to the ridiculous."

"I imagine so. Why not prove it? Or would you still rather try to prove it to the public?"

The light in the office was dimming, but it was not yet too dim to obscure the flush of frustration on Alfred Lanning's face. Slowly, the roboticist's finger touched a knob and the wall illuminators glowed to gentle life.

"Well, then," he growled, "let us see."

The face of Stephen Byerley is not an easy one to describe. He was forty by birth certificate and forty by appearance—but it was a healthy, well-nourished good-natured appearance of forty; one that automatically drew the teeth of the bromide about "looking one's age."

This was particularly true when he laughed, and he was laughing now. It came loudly and continuously, died away for a bit, then began again—

And Alfred Lanning's face contracted into a rigidly bitter monument of disapproval. He made a half gesture to the woman who sat beside him, but her thin,

bloodless lips merely pursed themselves a trifle.

Byerley gasped himself a stage nearer normality.

"Really, Dr. Lanning . . . really— I . . . I . . . a robot?"

Lanning bit his words off with a snap, "It is no statement of mine, sir. I would be quite satisfied to have you a member of humanity. Since our corporation never manufactured you, I am quite certain that you are—in a legalistic sense, at any rate. But since the contention that you are a robot has been advanced to us seriously by a man of certain standing—"

"Don't mention his name, if it would knock a chip off your granite block of ethics, but let's pretend it was Frank Quinn, for the sake of argument, and continue."

Lanning drew in a sharp, cutting snort at the interruption, and paused ferociously before continuing with added fridity, "—by a man of certain standing, with whose identity I am not interested in playing guessing games, I am bound to ask your co-operation in disproving it. The mere fact that such a contention could be advanced and publicized by the means at this man's disposal would be a bad blow to the company I represent—even if the charge were never proven. You understand me?"

"Oh, yes, your position is clear to me. The charge itself is ridiculous. The spot you find yourself in is not. I beg your pardon, if my laughter offended you. It was the first I laughed at, not the second. How can I help you?"

"It would be very simple. You have only to sit down to a meal at a restaurant in the presence of witnesses, have your picture taken, and eat." Lanning sat back in his chair, the worst of the interview over. The woman beside him watched Byerley with an apparently absorbed expression but contributed nothing of her own.

Stephen Byerley met her eyes for an instant, was caught by them, then turned back to the roboticist. For a while his fingers were thoughtful over the bronze paper-weight that was the only ornament on his desk.

He said quietly, "I don't think I can oblige you."

He raised his hand, "Now wait, Dr. Lanning. I appreciate the fact that this whole matter is distasteful to you, that you have been forced into it against your will, that you feel you are playing an undignified and even ridiculous part. Still, the matter is even more intimately concerned with myself, so be tolerant.

"First, what makes you think that Quinn—this man of a certain standing, you know—wasn't hood-winking you, in order to get you to do exactly what you are doing."

"Why, it seems scarcely likely that a reputable person would endanger himself in so ridiculous a fashion, if he weren't convinced he were on safe ground."

There was little humor in Byerley's eyes, "You don't know Quinn. He could manage to make safe ground out of a ledge a mountain sheep couldn't handle. I suppose he showed the particulars of the investigation he claims to have made of me?"

"Enough to convince me that it would be too troublesome to have our corporation attempt to disprove them when you could do so more easily."

"Then you believe him when he says I never eat. You are a scientist, Dr. Lanning. Think of the logic required. I have not been observed to eat, therefore, I never eat Q.E.D. After all!"

"You are using prosecution tactics to confuse what is really a very simple situation."

"On the contrary, I am trying to clarify what you and Quinn between you are making a very complicated one. You see, I don't sleep much, that's true, and I certainly don't sleep in public. I have never cared to eat with others—an idiosyncrasy which is unusual and probably neurotic in character, but which harms no one. Look, Dr. Lanning, let me present you with a supposititious case. Supposing we had a politician who was interested in defeating a reform candidate at any cost and while investigating his private life came across oddities such as I have just mentioned.

"Suppose further that in order to smear the candidate effectively, he comes to your company as the ideal agent. Do you expect him to say to you, 'So-and-so is a robot because he hardly ever eats with people, and I have never seen him fall asleep in the middle of a case; and once when I peeped into his window in the middle of the night, there he was sitting up with a book; and I looked in his frigidaire and there was no food in it.

"If he told you that, you would send for a strait jacket. But if he tells you, 'He never sleeps; he never eats,' then the shock of the statement blinds you to the fact that such statements are impossible to prove. You play into his hands by contributing to the to-do."

"Regardless, sir," began Lanning, with a threatening obstinacy. "of whether you consider this matter serious or not, it will

require only the meal I mentioned to end it."

Again Byerley turned to the woman, who still regarded him expressionlessly. "Pardon me. I've caught your name correctly, haven't I? Dr. Susan Calvin?"

"Yes, Mr. Byerley."

"You're the U.S. Robot's psychologist, aren't you?"

"Robopsychologist, please."

"Oh, are robots so different from men, mentally?"

"Worlds different." She allowed herself a frosty smile, "Robots are essentially decent."

Humor tugged at the corners of the lawyer's mouth, "Well, that's a hard blow. But what I wanted to say was this. Since you're a psycho—a robopsychologist, and a woman, I'll bet that you've done something that Dr. Lanning hasn't thought of."

"And what is that?"

"You've got something to eat in your purse."

Something caught in the schooled indifference of Susan Calvin's eyes. She said, "You surprise me, Mr. Byerley."

And opening her purse, she produced an apple. Quietly, she handed it to him. Dr. Lanning, after an initial start, followed the slow movement from one hand to the other with sharply alert eyes.

Calmly, Stephen Byerley bit into it, and calmly he swallowed it.

"You see, Dr. Lanning?"

Dr. Lanning smiled in a relief tangible enough to make even his eyebrows appear benevolent. A relief that survived for one fragile second.

Susan Calvin said, "I was curious to see if you would eat it, but, of course, in the present case, it proves nothing."

Byerley grinned, "It doesn't?"

"Of course not. It is obvious, Dr. Lanning, that if this man were a humanoid robot, he would be a perfect imitation. He is almost too human to be credible. After all, we have been seeing and observing human beings all our lives; it would be impossible to palm something merely right off on us. It would have to be *all* right. Observe the texture of the skin, the quality of the irises, the bone formation of the hand. If he's a robot, I wish U.S. Robots *had* made him, because he's a good job. Do you suppose then, that anyone capable of paying attention to such niceties would neglect a few gadgets to take care of such things as eating, sleeping, elimination? For emergency use only, perhaps; as, for instance, to prevent such situations as are arising

here. So a meal won't really prove anything."

"Now wait," snarled Lanning, "I am not quite the fool both of you make me out to be. I am not interested in the problem of Mr. Byerley's humanity or non-humanity. I am interested in getting the corporation out of a hole. A public meal will end the matter and keep it ended no matter what Quinn does. We can leave the finer details to lawyers and robopsychologists."

"But, Dr. Lanning," said Byerley, "you forget the politics of the situation. I am as anxious to be elected, as Quinn is to stop me. By the way, did you notice that you used his name. It's a cheap shyster trick of mine; I knew you would, before you were through."

Lanning flushed, "What has the election to do with it?"

"Publicity works both ways, sir. If Quinn wants to call me a robot, and has the nerve to do so, I have the nerve to play the game his way."

"You mean you—" Lanning was quite frankly appalled.

"Exactly. I mean that I'm going to let him go ahead, choose his rope, test its strength, cut off the right length, tie the noose, insert his head and grin. I can do what little else is required."

"You are mighty confident."

Susan Calvin rose to her feet, "Come, Alfred, we won't change his mind for him."

"You see." Byerley smiled gently. "You're a human psychologist, too."

But perhaps not all the confidence that Dr. Lanning had remarked upon was present that evening when Byerley's car parked on the automatic treads leading to the sunken garage, and Byerley himself crossed the path to the front door of his house.

The figure in the wheel chair looked up as he entered and smiled. Byerley's face lit with affection. He crossed over to it.

The cripple's voice was a hoarse, grating whisper that came out of a mouth forever twisted to one side, leering out of a face that was half scar tissue, "You're late, Steve."

"I know, John, I know. But I've been up against a peculiar and interesting trouble today."

"So?" Neither the torn face nor the destroyed voice could carry expression, but there was anxiety in the clear eyes.

"Nothing you can't handle?"

"I'm not exactly certain. I may need your help. *You're* the brilliant one in the family. Do you want me to take you

out into the garden? It's a beautiful evening."

Two strong arms lifted John from the wheel chair. Gently, almost caressingly, Byerley's arms went around the shoulders and under the swathed legs of the cripple. Carefully, and slowly, he walked through the rooms, down the gentle ramp that had been built with a wheel chair in mind, and out the back door into the walled and wired garden behind the wired house.

"Why don't you let me use the wheel chair, Steve? This is silly."

"Because I'd rather carry you. Do you object? You know that you're as glad to get out of that motorized buggy for a while as I am to see you out. How do you feel today?" he deposited John with infinite care upon the cool grass.

"How should I feel? But tell me about your trouble."

"Quinn's campaign will be based on the fact that he claims I'm a robot."

John's eyes opened wide. "How do you know? It's impossible. I won't believe it."

"Oh, come, I tell you it's so. He had one of the big-shot scientists of U.S. Robot & Mechanical Men Corporation over at the office to argue with me."

Slowly John's hands tore at the grass. "I see. I see."

Byerley said, "But we can let him choose his ground. I have an idea. Listen to me and tell me if we can do it—"

The scene as it appeared in Alfred Lanning's office that night was a tableau of stares. Francis Quinn stared meditatively at Alfred Lanning. Lanning's stare was savagely set upon Susan Calvin, who stared impassively in her turn at Quinn.

Francis Quinn broke it with a heavy attempt at lightness, "Bluff. He's making it up as he goes along."

"Are you going to gamble on that, Mr. Quinn?" asked Dr. Calvin, indifferently.

"Well, it's your gamble, really."

"Look here," Lanning covered definite pessimism with bluster, "we've done what you asked. We witnessed the man eat. It's ridiculous to presume him a robot."

"Do you think so?" Quinn shot towards Calvin. "Lanning said you were the expert."

Lanning was almost threatening. "Now, Susan—"

Quinn interrupted smoothly, "Why not let her talk, man? She's been sitting there imitating a gatepost for half an hour."

Lanning felt definitely harassed. From what he experienced then to incipient paranoia was but a step. He said,

"Very well. Have your say, Susan. We won't interrupt you."

Susan Quinn glanced at him humorlessly, then fixed cold eyes on Mr. Quinn. "There are only two ways of definitely proving Byerley to be a robot, sir. So far you are presenting circumstantial evidence, with which you can accuse, but not prove—and I think Mr. Byerley is sufficiently clever to counter that sort of material. You probably think so yourself, or you wouldn't have come here."

"The two methods of *proof* are the physical and the psychological. Physically, you can dissect him or use an X ray. How to do that would be *your* problem. Psychologically, his behavior can be studied, for if he is a positronic robot, he must conform to the three Rules of Robotics. A positronic brain can not be constructed without them. You know the Rules, Mr. Quinn?"

She spoke them carefully, clearly, quoting word for word the famous bold print on page one of the "Handbook of Robotics."

"Rule One: A robot may not harm, nor, by inaction, cause to be harmed, any human being."

"Rule Two: A robot must obey all orders given it by authorized personnel, except where these would conflict with Rule One."

"Rule Three: A robot must preserve its own safety, except where that would conflict with Rules One and Two."

"I've heard of them," said Quinn, carelessly.

"Then the matter is easy to follow," responded the psychologist, dryly. "If Mr. Byerley breaks any of those three rules, he is not a robot. Unfortunately, this procedure works in only one direction. If he lives up to the rules, it proves nothing one way or the other."

Quinn raised polite eyebrows, "Why not, doctor?"

"Because, if you stop to think of it, the three Rules of robotics are the essential guiding principles of a good many of the world's ethical systems. Of course, every human being is supposed to have the instinct of self-preservation. That's Rule Three to a robot. Also every 'good' human being, with a social conscience and a sense of responsibility, is supposed to defer to proper authority; to listen to his doctor, his boss, his government, his psychiatrist, his fellow-man; to obey laws, to follow rules, to conform to custom—even when they interfere with his comfort or his safety. That's Rule Two to a robot. Also, every 'good' human being is supposed to love others as him-

self, protect his fellow-man, risk his life to save another. That's Rule One to a robot. To put it simply—if Byerley follows all the Rules of Robotics, he may be a robot, and may simply be a very good man."

"But," said Quinn, "you're telling me that you can never prove him a robot."

"I may be able to prove him *not* a robot."

"That's not the proof I want."

"You'll have such proof as exists. You are the only one responsible for your own wants."

Here Lanning's mind leaped suddenly to the sting of an idea, "Has it occurred to anyone," he ground out, "that district attorney is a rather strange occupation for a robot? The prosecution of human beings—sentencing them to death—bringing about their infinite harm—"

Quinn grew suddenly keen, "No, you can't get out of it that way. Being district attorney doesn't make him human. Don't you know that he boasts that he has never prosecuted an innocent man; that there are scores of people left untried because the evidence against them didn't satisfy him, even though he could probably have argued a jury into atomizing them? That happens to be so."

Lanning's thin cheeks quivered. "No, Quinn, no. There is nothing in the Rules of Robotics that makes any allowance for human guilt. A robot may not judge whether a human being deserves death. It is not for him to decide. *He may not harm a human*—variety skunk, or variety angel."

Susan Calvin sounded tired. "Alfred," she said, "don't talk foolishly. What if a robot came upon a madman about to set fire to a house with people in it. He would stop the madman, wouldn't he?"

"Of course."

"And if the only way he could stop him was to kill him—"

There was a faint sound in Lanning's throat. Nothing more.

"The answer to that, Alfred, is that he would do his best not to kill him. If the madman died, the robot would require psychotherapy because he might easily go mad at the conflict presented him—of having broken Rule One to adhere to Rule One in a higher sense. But a man would be dead and a robot would have killed him."

"Well, is Byerley mad?" demanded Lanning, with all the sarcasm he could muster.

"No, but he has killed no man himself. He has exposed facts which might

represent a particular human being to be dangerous to the large mass of other human beings we call society. He protects the greater number and thus adheres to Rule One at maximum potential. That is as far as he goes. It is the judge who then condemns the criminal to death or imprisonment, after the jury decides on his guilt or innocence. It is the jailer who imprisons him, the executioner who kills him. And Mr. Byerley has done nothing but determine truth and aid society.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Quinn, I have looked into Mr. Byerley's career since you first brought this matter to our attention. I find that he has never demanded the death sentence in his closing speeches to the jury. I also find that he has spoken on behalf of the abolition of capital punishment and contributed generously to research institutions engaged in Criminal Neurophysiology." He apparently believes in the cure, rather than the punishment, of crime. I find that significant."

"You do?" Quinn smiled. "Significant of a certain odor of robotcity, perhaps?"

"Perhaps? Why deny it? Actions such as his could come only from a robot, or from a very honorable and decent human being. But you see, you just can't differentiate between a robot and the very best of humans."

Quinn sat back in his chair. His voice quivered with impatience. "Dr. Lanning, it's perfectly possible to create a humanoid robot that would perfectly duplicate a human in appearance, isn't it?"

Lanning harrumphed and considered. "It's been done experimentally by U.S. Robots," he said reluctantly, "without the addition of a positronic brain, of course. By using human ova and hormone control, one can grow human flesh and skin over a skeleton of porous silicone plastics that would defy external examination. The eyes, the hair, the skin would be really human, not humanoid. And if you put a positronic brain, and such other gadgets as you might desire inside, you have a humanoid robot."

Quinn said shortly, "How long would it take to make one?"

Lanning considered. "If you had all your equipment—the brain, the skeleton, the ovum, the proper hormones and radiations—say, two months."

The politician straightened out of his chair. "Then we shall see what the insides of Mr. Byerley look like. It will mean publicity for U.S. Robots—but I gave you your chance."

Lanning turned impatiently to Susan Calvin, when they were alone. "Why do you insist—"

And with real feeling, she responded sharply and instantly, "Which do you want—the truth or my resignation? I won't lie for you. U.S. Robots can take care of itself. Don't turn coward."

"What," said Lanning, "if he opens up Byerley, and wheels and gears fall out. What then?"

"He won't open Byerley," said Calvin, disdainfully. "Byerley is as clever as Quinn, at the very least."

The news broke upon the city a week before Byerley was to have been nominated. But "broke" is the wrong word. It staggered upon the city, shambled, crawled. Laughter began, and wit was free. And as the far-off hand of Quinn tightened its pressure in easy stages, the laughter grew forced, an element of hollow uncertainty entered, and people broke off to wonder.

The convention itself had the air of a restive stallion. There had been no contest planned. Only Byerley could possibly have been nominated a week earlier. There was no substitute even now. They had to nominate him, but there was complete confusion about it.

It wouldn't have been so bad if the average individual were not torn between the enormity of the charge, if true, and its sensational folly, if false.

The day after Byerley was nominated perfunctorily, hollowly—a newspaper finally published the gist of a long interview with Dr. Susan Calvin, "world-famous expert on robopsychology and positronics."

What broke loose is popularly and succinctly described as hell.

It was what the Fundamentalists were waiting for. They were not a political party; they made pretense to no formal religion. Essentially they were those who had not adapted themselves to what had once been called the Atomic Age, in the days when atoms were a novelty. Actually, they were the Simple-Lifers, hungering after a Life, which, to those who lived it had probably appeared not so Simple, and who were, therefore, Simple-Lifers themselves. But I grow complicated.

The Fundamentalists required no new reason to detest robots and robot manufacturers; but a new reason such as the Quinn accusation and the Calvin analysis was sufficient to make such detestation audible.

The huge plants of the U.S. Robot &

Mechanical Men Corporation was a hive that spawned armed guards. It prepared for war.

Within the city the house of Stephen Byerley bristled with police.

The political campaign, of course, lost all other issues, and resembled a campaign only in that it was something filling the hiatus between nomination and election.

Stephen Byerley did not allow the fussy little man to distract him. He remained comfortably unperturbed by the uniforms in the background. Outside the house, past the line of grim guards, reporters and photographers waited according to the tradition of the caste. One enterprising visor station even had a scanner focused on the blank entrance to the prosecutor's unpretentious home, while a synthetically excited announcer filled in with inflated commentary.

The fussy little man advanced. He held forward a rich, complicated sheet. "This, Mr. Byerley, is a court order authorizing me to search these premises for the presence of illegal . . . uh . . . mechanical men or robots of any description."

Byerley half-rose, and took the paper. He glanced at it indifferently, and smiled as he handed it back. "All in order. Go ahead. Do your job. Mrs. Hoppen"—to his housekeeper, who appeared reluctantly from the next room—"please go with them, and help out if you can."

The little man, whose name, Harroway, is completely unimportant for our purposes, except for its possible use as a handle, hesitated, produced an unmistakable blush, failed completely to catch Byerley's eyes, and muttered, "Come on," to the two policemen.

He was back in ten minutes.

"Through?" questioned Byerley, in just the tone of a person who is not particularly interested in the question, or its answer.

Harroway cleared his throat, made a bad start in falsetto, and began again, angrily. "Look here, Mr. Byerley, our especial instructions were to search the house very thoroughly."

"And haven't you?"

"We were told exactly what to look for."

"Yes?"

"In short, Mr. Byerley, and not to put too fine a point on it, we were told to search you."

"Me?" said the prosecutor with a broadening smile. "And how do you intend to do that?"

"We have a Penet-radiation unit—"

"Then I'm to have my X-ray photo-

graph taken, hey? You have the authority?"

"You saw my warrant."

"May I see it again?"

Harroway, his forehead shining with considerably more than mere enthusiasm, passed it over a second time.

Byerley said evenly, "I read here as the description of what you're to search; I quote: 'the dwelling place belonging to Stephen Allen Byerley, located at 355 Willow Grove, Evanston, together with any garage, storehouse or other structures or buildings thereto appertaining, together with all grounds thereto appertaining' . . . um . . . and so on. Quite in order. But, my good man, it doesn't say anything about searching my interior. I'm not part of the premises. You may search my clothes if you think I've got a robot hidden in my pocket."

Harroway had no doubts on the point of to whom he owed his job. He did not propose to be backward, given a chance to earn a much better—i.e. more highly paid—job.

He said, in a faint echo of bluster, "Look here. I'm allowed to search the furniture in your house, and anything else I find in it. You're in it, aren't you?"

"A remarkable observation. I *am* in it. But I'm not a piece of furniture. As a citizen of adult responsibility—I have the psychiatric certificate proving that—I have certain rights under the World Articles. Searching me would come under the heading of violating my Right of Privacy. That paper isn't sufficient."

"Sure, but if you're a robot, you don't have any Right of Privacy."

"True enough—but that paper still isn't sufficient. It recognizes me implicitly as a human being."

"Where?" Harroway snatched at it.

"Where it says 'the dwelling place belonging to' and so on. A robot cannot own property. And you may tell your employer, Mr. Harroway, that if he tries to issue a similar paper which does *not* implicitly recognize me as a human being, he will be immediately faced with a restraining injunction and a civil suit which will make it necessary for him to *prove* me a robot by means of information *now* in his possession, or else to pay a whopping penalty for an attempt to deprive me unduly of my Rights under the World Articles. You'll tell him that, won't you?"

Harroway marched to the door. He turned. "You're a slick lawyer—" His hand was in his pocket. For a short moment, he stood there. Then he left, smiled in the direction of the visor scan-

ner, still playing away—waved to the reporters, and shouted, "We'll have something for you tomorrow, boys. No kidding."

In his ground car, he settled back, removed the tiny mechanism from his pocket and carefully inspected it. It was the first time he had ever taken a photograph by X-ray reflection. He hoped he had done it correctly.

Quinn and Byerley had never met face-to-face alone. But visor-phone was pretty close to it. In fact, accepted literally, perhaps the phrase was accurate, even if to each, the other were merely the light-and-dark pattern of a bank of photocells.

It was Quinn who had initiated the call. It was Quinn, who spoke first, and without particular ceremony, "Thought you'd like to know, Byerley, that I intend to make public the fact that you're wearing a protective shield against Penet-radiation."

"That so? In that case, you've probably already made it public. I have a notion our enterprising press representatives have been tapping my various communication lines for quite a while. I know they have my office lines full of holes; which is why I've dug in at my home these last weeks." Byerley was friendly, almost chatty.

Quinn's lips tightened slightly. "This call is shielded—thoroughly. I'm making it at a certain personal risk."

"So I should imagine. Nobody knows you're behind this campaign. At least, nobody knows it officially. Nobody doesn't know it unofficially. I wouldn't worry. So I wear a protective shield? I suppose you found that out when your puppy-dog's Penet-radiation photograph, the other day, turned out to be over-exposed."

"You realize, Byerley, that it would be pretty obvious to everyone that you don't dare face X-ray analysis."

"Also that you, or your men, attempted illegal invasion of my Right of Privacy."

"The devil they'll care for that."

"They might. It's rather symbolic of our two campaigns, isn't it? You have little concern with the rights of the individual citizen. I have great concern. I will not submit to X-ray analysis, because I wish to maintain my Rights on principle. Just as I'll maintain the rights of others when elected."

"That will no doubt make a very interesting speech, but no one will believe you. A little too high-sounding to be true. Another thing," a sudden, crisp change,

"the personnel in your home was not complete the other night."

"In what way?"

"According to the report," he shuffled papers before him that were just within the range of vision of the visiplat, "there was one person missing—a cripple."

"As you say," said Byerley, tonelessly, "a cripple. My old teacher, who lives with me and who is now in the country—and has been for two months. A 'much-needed rest' is the usual expression applied in the case. He has your permission?"

"Your teacher? A scientist of sorts?"

"A lawyer once—before he was a cripple. He has a government license as a research biophysicist, with a laboratory of his own, and a complete description of the work he's doing filed with the proper authorities, to whom I can refer you. The work is minor, but is a harmless and engaging hobby for a—poor cripple. I am being as helpful as I can, you see."

"I see. And what does this . . . teacher . . . know about robot manufacture?"

"I couldn't judge the extent of his knowledge in a field in which I am unacquainted."

"He wouldn't have access to positronic brains?"

"Ask your friends at U.S. Robots. They'd be the ones to know."

"I'll put it shortly, Byerley. Your crippled teacher is the real Stephen Byerley. You are his robot creation. We can prove it. It was he who was in the automobile accident, not you. There will be ways of checking the records."

"Really? Do so, then. My best wishes."

"And we can search your so-called teacher's 'country place,' and see what we can find there."

"Well, not quite, Quinn." Byerley smiled broadly. "Unfortunately for you, my so-called teacher is a sick man. His country place is his place of rest. His Right of Privacy as a citizen of adult responsibility is naturally even stronger, under the circumstances. You won't be able to obtain a warrant to enter his grounds without showing just cause. And I don't think you'll be able to show just cause. As an adequate lawyer, specializing in the interpretation of the World Articles, I guarantee that you won't be able to show just cause. However, I'd be the last to prevent you from trying."

There was a pause of moderate length, and then Quinn leaned forward, so that his imaged-face expanded and the fine lines on his forehead were visible. "Byerley, why do you carry on? You can't be elected."

"Can't I?"

"Do you think you can? Do you suppose that your failure to make any attempt to disprove the robot charge—when you could easily, by breaking one of the Three Laws—does anything but convince the people that you *are* a robot."

"All I see so far is that from being a rather vaguely-known, but still largely-obscure metropolitan lawyer, I have now become a world-figure. You're a good publicist."

"But you *are* a robot."

"So it's been said, but not proven."

"It's been proven sufficiently for the electorate."

"Then relax—you've won."

"Good-by," said Quinn, with his first touch of viciousness, and the visiphone slammed off.

"Good-by," said Byerley imperturbably, to the blank plate.

Byerley brought his "teacher" back the week before election. The air car dropped quickly in an obscure part of the city.

"You'll stay here till after election," Byerley told him. "It would be better to have you out of the way if things take a bad turn."

The hoarse voice that twisted painfully out of John's crooked mouth might have had accents of concern in it. "There's danger of violence?"

"The Fundamentalists threaten it, so I suppose there is, in a theoretical sense. But I really don't expect it. The Fundies have no real power. They're just the continuous irritant factor that might stir up a riot after a while. You don't mind staying here? Please. I won't be myself if I have to worry about you."

"Oh, I'll stay. You still think it will go well?"

"I'm sure of it. No one bothered you at the place?"

"No one. I'm certain."

"And your part went well?"

"Well enough. There'll be no trouble there."

"Then take care of yourself, and watch the televisior tomorrow, John." Byerley pressed the gnarled hand that rested on his.

Lenton's forehead was a furrowed study in suspense. He had the completely unenviable job of being Byerley's campaign manager in a campaign that wasn't a campaign, for a person that refused to reveal his strategy, and refused to accept his manager's.

"You can't!" It was his favorite phrase. It had become his only phrase.

"I tell you, Steve, you can't!"

He threw himself in front of the pro-

secutor, who was spending his time leafing through his typed pages of his speech.

"Put that down, Steve. Look, that mob has been organized by the Fundies. You won't get a hearing. You'll be stoned more likely. "Why do you have to make a speech before an audience? What's wrong with a recording, a visual recording?"

"You want me to win the election, don't you?" asked Byerley, mildly.

"Win the election! You're going to win, Steve. I'm trying to save your life."

"Oh, I'm not in danger."

"He's not in danger. He's not in danger." Lenton made a queer, rasping sound in his throat. "You mean you're getting out on that balcony in front of fifty thousand crazy crackpots and try to talk sense to them—on a balcony like a medieval dictator?"

Byerley consulted his watch. "In about five minutes—as soon as the television lines are free."

Lenton's answering remark was not quite transliterable.

The crowd filled a roped-off area of the city. Trees and houses seemed to grow out of a mass-human foundation. And by ultra-wave, the rest of the world watched. It was a purely local election, but it had a world audience just the same. Byerley thought of that and smiled.

But there was nothing to smile at in the crowd itself. There were banners and streamers, ringing every possible change on his supposed robotcy. The hostile attitude rose thickly and tangibly into the atmosphere.

From the start, the speech was not successful. It competed against the inchoate mob howl and the rhythmic cries of the Fundie claquees that formed mob-islands within the mob. Byerley spoke on, slowly, unemotionally—

Inside, Lenton clutched his hair and groaned—and waited for the blood.

There was a writhing in the front ranks. An angular citizen, with popping eyes, and clothes too short for the lank length of his limbs, was pulling to the fore. A policeman dived after him, making slow, struggling passage. Byerley waved the latter off, angrily.

The thin man was directly under the balcony. His words tore unheard against the roar.

Byerley leaned forward. "What do you say? If you have a legitimate question, I'll answer it." He turned to a flanking guard. "Bring that man up here."

There was a tensing in the crowd. Cries of "Quiet" started in various parts of the mob, and rose to a bedlam, then

toned down raggedly. The thin man, red-faced and panting, faced Byerley.

Byerley said, "Have you a question?"

The thin man stared, and said in a cracked voice, "Hit me!"

With sudden energy, he thrust out his chin at an angle. "Hit me! You say you're not a robot. Prove it. You can't hit a human, you monster."

There was a queer, flat, dead silence. Byerley's voice punctured it. "I have no reason to hit you."

The thin man was laughing wildly. "You *can't* hit me. You *won't* hit me. You're not a human. You're a monster, a make-believe man."

And Stephen Byerley, tight-lipped, in the face of thousands who watched in person and the millions who watched by screen, drew back his fist and caught the man crackingly upon the chin. The challenger went over backwards in sudden collapse, with nothing on his face but blank, blank surprise.

Byerley said, "I'm sorry. Take him in and see that he's comfortable. I want to speak to him when I'm through."

And when Dr. Calvin, from her reserved space, turned her automobile and drove off, only one reporter had recovered sufficiently from the shock to race after her, and shout an unheard question.

Susan Calvin called over her shoulder, "He's human."

That was enough. The reporter raced away in his own direction.

The rest of the speech might be described as "Spoken, but not heard."

Dr. Calvin and Stephen Byerley met once again—a week before he took the oath of office as mayor. It was late—past midnight.

Dr. Calvin said, "You don't look tired."

The mayor-elect smiled. "I may stay up for awhile. Don't tell Quinn."

"I shan't. But that was an interesting story of Quinn's, since you mention him. It's a shame to have spoiled it. I suppose you knew his theory?"

"Parts of it."

"It was highly dramatic. Stephen Byerley was a young lawyer, a powerful speaker, a great idealist—and with a certain flair for biophysics. Are you interested in robotics, Mr. Byerley?"

"Only in the legal aspects."

"This Stephen Byerley was. But there was an accident. Byerley's wife died; he himself, worse. His legs were gone; his face was gone; his voice was gone. Part of his mind was—bent. He would not submit to plastic surgery. He retired from

the world, legal career gone—only his intelligence, and his hands left. Somehow he could obtain positronic brains, even a complex one, one which had the greatest capacity of forming judgments in ethical problems—which is the highest robotic function so far developed.

"He grew a body about it. Trained it to be everything he would have been and was no longer. He sent it out into the world as Stephen Byerley, remaining behind himself as the old, crippled teacher that no one ever saw—"

"Unfortunately," said the mayor-elect, "I ruined all that by hitting a man. The papers say it was your official verdict on the occasion that I was human."

"How did that happen? Do you mind telling me? It couldn't have been accidental."

"It wasn't entirely. Quinn did most of the work. My men started quietly spreading the fact that I had never hit a man; that I was unable to hit a man; that to fail to do so under provocation would be sure proof that I was a robot. So I arranged for a silly speech in public with all sorts of publicity overtones, and almost inevitably, some fool fell for it. In its essence, it was what I call a shyster trick. One in which the artificial atmosphere which has been created does all the work. Of course, the emotional effects made my election certain, as intended."

The robopsychologist smiled faintly. "I see you intrude on my field—as every politician must, I suppose. But I'm very sorry it turned out this way. I like robots. I like them considerably better than I do human beings. If a robot can be created capable of being a civil executive, I think he'd make the best one possible. By the Laws of Robotics, he'd be incapable of harming humans, incapable of tyranny, of corruption, of stupidity, of prejudice. And after he had served a decent term, he would leave, even though

he were immortal, because it would be impossible for him to hurt humans by letting them know that a robot had ruled them. It would be most ideal."

"Except that a robot might fail due to the inherent inadequacies of his brain. The positronic brain has never equalled the complexities of the human brain."

"He would have advisers. Not even a human brain is capable of governing without assistance."

Byerley considered Susan Calvin with grave interest. "Why do you smile, Dr. Calvin?"

"I smile because Mr. Quinn didn't think of everything."

"You mean there could be more to that story of his."

"Only a little. For the three months before election, this Stephen Byerley that Mr. Quinn spoke about, this broken man, was in the country for some mysterious reason. He returned in time for that famous speech of yours. And after all, what the old cripple did once, he could do a second time, particularly when the second job is very simple in comparison to the first."

"I don't quite understand."

Dr. Calvin rose and smoothed her dress. She was obviously ready to leave. "I mean there is one time when a robot may strike a human being without breaking the First Law. Just one time."

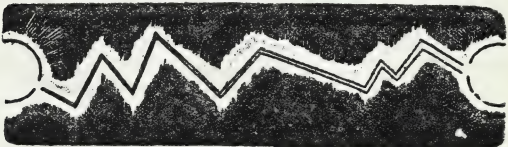
"And when is that?"

Dr. Calvin was at the door. She said quietly, "When the human to be struck is merely another robot."

She smiled broadly, her thin face glowing. "Good-by, Mr. Byerley. I hope to vote for you five years from now—for co-ordinator."

Stephen Byerley chuckled. "I must reply that that is a somewhat farfetched idea."

The door closed behind her.



PARADISE

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

The Mutants had solved the secret of the philosophy that would give men peace—but the man who returned from Jupiter offered Paradise with a price tag; the oblivion of mankind.

THE dome was a squatted, alien shape that did not belong beneath the purple mist of Jupiter, a huddled, frightened structure that seemed to cower against the massive planet.

The creature that had been Kent Fowler stood spraddling on his thick-set legs.

An alien thing, he thought. That's how far I've left the human race. For it's not alien at all. Not alien to me. It is the place I lived in, dreamed in, planned in. It is the place I left—afraid. And it is the place I come back to—driven and afraid.

Driven by the memory of the people who were like me before I became the thing I am, before I knew the liveness and the fitness and the pleasure that is possible if one is not a human being.

Towser stirred beside him and Fowler sensed the bumbling friendliness of the one-time dog, the *expressed* friendliness and comradeship and love that had existed all the time, perhaps, but was never known so long as they were dog and man.

The dog's thoughts seeped into his brain. "You can't do it, pal," said Towser.

Fowler's answer was almost a wail. "But I have to, Towser. That's what I went out for. To find what Jupiter really is like. And now I can tell them, now I can bring them word."

You should have done it long ago, said a voice deep inside of him, a faint, far-off human voice that struggled up through his Jovian self. *But you were a coward and you put it off—and put it off. You ran away because you were afraid to go back. Afraid to be turned into a man again.*

"I'll be lonesome," said Towser, and yet he did not say it. At least there were no words—rather a feeling of loneliness, a heart-wrench cry at parting. As if, for the moment, Fowler had moved over and shared Towser's mind.

Fowler stood silent, revulsion growing in him. Revulsion at the thought of being turned back into a man—into the inadequacy that was the human body and the human mind.

"I'd come with you," Towser told him,

"but I couldn't stand it. I might die before I could get back. I was darn near done for, you remember. I was old and full of fleas. My teeth were wore right down to nubbins and my digestica was all shot. And I had terrible dreams. Used to chase rabbits when I was a pup, but toward the last it was the rabbits that were chasing me."

"You stay here," said Fowler. "I'll be coming back."

If I can make them understand, he thought. *If I only can. If I can explain.*

He lifted his massive head and stared at the lift of hills which swelled to mountain peaks shrouded in the rose and purple mist. A lightning bolt snaked across the sky and the clouds and mist were lighted with a fire of ecstasy.

He shambled forward, slowly, reluctantly. A whiff of scent came down the breeze and his body drank it in—like a cat rolling in catnip. And yet it wasn't scent—although that was the closest he could come to it, the nearest word he had. In years to come the human race would develop a new terminology.

How could one, he wondered, explain the mist that drifted on the land and the scent that was pure delight. Other things they'd understand, he knew. That one never had to eat, that one never slept, that one was done with the whole range of depressive neurosis of which Man was victim. Those things they would understand, because they were things that could be told in simple terms, things which could be explained in existent language.

But what about the other things—the factors that called for a new vocabulary? The emotions that Man had never known. The abilities that Man had never dreamed of. The clarity of mind and the understanding—the ability to use one's brain down to the ultimate cell. The things one knew and could do instinctively that Man could never do because his body did not carry the senses with which they could be done.

"I'll write it down," he told himself. "I'll take my time and write it down."

But the written word, he realized, was a sorry tool.

A television port bulged out of the crystalline hide of the dome and he shambled toward it. Rivulets of condensed mist ran down across it and he reared up to stare straight into the port.

Not that he could see anything, but the men inside would see him. The men who always watched, staring out at the brutality of Jupiter, the roaring gales and ammonia rains, the drifting clouds of deadly methane scudding past. For that was the way that men saw Jupiter.

He lifted a forepaw and wrote swiftly in the wetness on the port—printing backwards.

They had to know who it was, so there would be no mistake. They had to know what co-ordinates to use. Otherwise they might convert him back into the wrong body, use the wrong matrix and he would come out somebody else—young Allen, maybe, or Smith, or Pelletier. And that might well be fatal.

The ammonia ran down and blurred the printing, wiped it out. He wrote the name again.

They would understand that name. They would know that one of the men who had been converted into a Loper had come back to report.

He dropped to the ground and whirled around, staring at the door which led into the converter unit. The door moved slowly, swinging outward.

"Good-by, Towser," said Fowler, softly.

A warning cry rose in his brain: *It's not too late. You aren't in there yet. You still can change your mind. You still can turn and run.*

He plodded on, determined, gritting mental teeth. He felt the metal floor underneath his pads, sensed the closing of the door behind him. He caught one last fragmentary thought from Towser and then there was only darkness.

The conversion chamber lay just ahead and he moved up the sloping ramp to reach it.

A man and dog went out, he thought, and now the man comes back.

The press conference had gone well. There had been satisfactory things to report.

Yes, Tyler Webster told the newsmen, the trouble on Venus had been all smoothed out. Just a matter of the parties involved sitting down and talking. The life experiments out in the cold laboratories of Pluto were progressing satisfactorily. The expedition for Centauri

would leave as scheduled, despite reports it was all balled up. The trade commission soon would issue new monetary schedules on various interplanetary products, ironing out a few inequalities.

Nothing sensational. Nothing to make headlines. Nothing to lead off the newscast.

"And Jon Culver tells me," said Webster, "to remind you gentlemen that today is the one hundred twenty-fifth anniversary of the last murder committed in the Solar System. One hundred and twenty-five years without a death by premeditated violence."

He leaned back in the chair and grinned at them, masking the thing he dreaded, the question that he knew would come.

But they were not ready to ask it yet—there was a custom to be observed—a very pleasant custom.

Burly Stephen Andrews, press chief for *Interplanetary News*, cleared his throat as if about to make an important announcement, asked with what amounted to mock gravity:

"And how's the boy?"

A smile broke across Webster's face. "I'm going home for the week-end," he said. "I bought my son a toy."

He reached out, lifted the little tube from off the desk.

"An old-fashioned toy," he said "Guaranteed old-fashioned. A company just started putting them out. You put it up to your eye and turn it and you see pretty pictures. Colored glass falling into place. There's a name for it—"

"Kaleidoscope," said one of the newsmen, quickly. "I've read about them. In an old history on the manners and customs of the early twentieth century."

"Have you tried it, Mr. Chairman?" asked Andrews.

"No," said Webster. "To tell the truth, I haven't. I just got it this afternoon and I've been too busy."

"Where'd you get it, Mr. Chairman?" asked a voice. "I got to get one of those for my own kid."

"At the shop just around the corner. The toy shop, you know. They just came in today."

Now, Webster knew, was the time for them to go. A little bit of pleasant, friendly banter and they'd get up and leave.

But they weren't leaving—and he knew it by the sudden hush and the papers that rattled quickly to cover up the hush.

Then Stephen Andrews was asking the question that Webster had dreaded. For

a moment Webster was grateful that Andrews should be the one to ask it. Andrews had been friendly, generally speaking, and *Interplanetary Press* dealt in objective news, with none of the sly slanting of words employed by interpretative writers.

"Mr. Chairman," said Andrews, "we understand a man who was converted on Jupiter has come back to Earth. We would like to ask you if the report is true?"

"It is true," said Webster, stiffly.

They waited and Webster waited, unmoving in his chair.

"Would you wish to comment?" asked Andrews, finally.

"No," said Webster.

Webster glanced around the room, ticking off the faces. Tensed faces, sensing some of the truth beneath his flat refusal to discuss the matter. Amused faces, masking brains that even now were thinking how they might twist the few words he had spoken. Angry faces that would write outraged interpretative pieces about the people's right to know.

"I am sorry, gentlemen," said Webster. Andrews rose heavily from the chair. "Thank you, Mr. Chairman," he said.

Webster sat in his chair and watched them go, felt the coldness and emptiness of the room when they were gone.

They'll crucify me, he thought. They'll nail me to the barn door and I haven't got a comeback. Not a single one.

He rose from the chair and walked across the room, stood staring out the window at the garden in the sun of afternoon.

Yet, you simply couldn't tell them.

Paradise! Heaven for the asking! And the end of humanity! The end of all the ideals and all the dreams of mankind, the end of the race itself.

The green light on his desk flashed and chirped and he strode back across the room.

"What is it?" he asked.

The tiny screen flashed and a face was there.

"The dogs just reported, sir, that Joe, the mutant, went to your residence and Jenkins let him in."

"Joe! You're sure?"

"That's what the dogs said. And the dogs are never wrong."

"No," said Webster slowly, "no, they never are."

The face faded from the screen and Webster sat down heavily.

He reached with numbed fingers for the

control panel on his desk, twirled the combination without looking.

The house loomed on the screen, the house in North America that crouched on the windy hilltop. A structure that had stood for almost a thousand years. A place where a long line of Websters had lived and dreamed and died.

Far in the blue above the house a crow was flying and Webster heard, or imagined that he heard, the wind-blown caw of the soaring bird.

Everything was all right—or seemed to be. The house drowsed in the morning light and the statue still stood upon the sweep of lawn—the statue of that long-gone ancestor who had vanished on the star-path. Allen Webster, who had been the first to leave the Solar System, heading for Centauri—even as the expedition now on Mars would head out in a day or two.

There was no stir about the house, no sign of any moving thing.

Webster's hand moved out and flipped a toggle. The screen went dead.

Jenkins can handle things, he thought. Probably better than a man could handle them. After all, he's got almost a thousand years of wisdom packed in that metal hide of his. He'll be calling in before long to let me know what it's all about.

His hand reached out, set up another combination.

He waited for long seconds before the face came on the screen.

"What is it, Tyler?" asked the face.

"Just got a report that Joe—"

Jon Culver nodded. "I just got it, too. I'm checking up."

"What do you make of it?"

The face of the World Security chief crinkled quizzically. "Softening up, maybe. We've been pushing Joe and the other mutants pretty hard. The dogs have done a top-notch job."

"But there have been no signs of it," protested Webster. "Nothing in the records to indicate any trend that way."

"Look," said Culver. "They haven't drawn a breath for more than a hundred years we haven't known about. Got everything they've done down on tape in black and white. Every move they've made, we've blocked. At first they figured it was just tough luck, but now they know it isn't. Maybe they've up and decided they are licked."

"I don't think so," said Webster, solemnly. "Whenever those babies figure they're licked, you better start looking for a place that's soft to light."

"I'll keep on top of it," Culver told him. "I'll keep you posted."

The plate faded and was a square of glass. Webster stared at it moodily.

The mutants weren't licked—not by a long shot. He knew that, and so did Culver. And yet—

Why had Joe gone to Jenkins? Why hadn't he contacted the government here in Geneva? Face saving, maybe. Dealing through a robot. After all, Joe had known Jenkins for a long, long time.

Unaccountably, Webster felt a surge of pride. Pride that if such were the case, Joe had gone to Jenkins. For Jenkins, despite his metal hide, was a Webster, too.

Pride, thought Webster. Accomplishment and mistake. But always counting for something. Each of them down the years. Jerome, who had lost the world the Juwain philosophy. And Thomas, who had given the world the space-drive principle that now had been perfected. And Thomas' son, Allen, who had tried for the stars and failed. And Bruce, who had first conceived the twin civilization of man and dog. Now, finally, himself — Tyler Webster, chairman of the World Committee.

Sitting at the desk, he clasped his hands in front of him, stared at the evening light pouring through the window.

Waiting, he confessed. Waiting for the snicker of the signal that would tell him Jenkins was calling to report on Joe. If only—

If only an understanding could be reached. If only mutants and men could work together. If they could forget this half-hidden war of stalemate, they could go far, the three of them together—man and dog and mutant.

Webster shook his head. It was too much to expect. The difference was too great, the breach too wide. Suspicion on the part of men and a tolerant amusement on the part of the mutants would keep the two apart. For the mutants were a different race, an offshoot that had jumped too far ahead. Men who had become true individuals with no need of society, no need of human approval, utterly lacking in the hard instinct that had held the race together, immune to social pressures.

And because of the mutants the little group of mutated dogs so far had been of little practical use to their older brother, man. For the dogs had watched for more than a hundred years, had been the police force that kept the human mutants under observation.

Webster slid back his chair, opened a

desk drawer, took out a sheaf of papers.

One eye on the televisior plate, he snapped over the toggle that called his secretary.

"Yes, Mr. Webster."

"I'm going to call on Mr. Fowler," said Webster. "If a call comes through—"

The secretary's voice shook just a little. "If one does, sir, I'll contact you right away."

"Thanks," said Webster.

He snapped the toggle back.

They've heard of it already, he thought. Everyone in the whole building is standing around with their tongues hanging out, waiting for the news.

Kent Fowler lounged in a chair in the garden outside his room, watching the little black terrier dig frantically after an imagined rabbit.



"You know, Rover," said Fowler, "you aren't fooling me."

The dog stopped digging, looked over his shoulder with grinning teeth, barked excitedly. Then went back to digging.

"You'll slip up one of these days," Fowler told him, "and say a word or two and I'll have you dead to rights."

Rover went on digging.

Foxy little devil, thought Fowler. Smarter than a whip. Webster sicked him on me and he's played the part, all right. He's dug for rabbits and he's been disrespectful to the shrubs and he's scratched for fleas—the perfect picture of a perfect dog. But I'm on to him. I'm on to all of them.

A foot crunched in the grass and Fowler looked up.

"Good evening," said Tyler Webster.

"I've been wondering when you'd come," said Fowler shortly. "Sit down and give it to me—straight. You don't believe me, do you?"

Webster eased himself into the second chair, laid the sheaf of papers in his lap.

"I can understand how you feel," he said.

"I doubt if you can," snapped Fowler. "I came here, bringing news that I thought was important. A report that had cost me more than you can imagine."

He hunched forward in his chair. "I wonder if you can realize that every hour I've spent as a human being has been mental torture."

"I'm sorry," said Webster. "But we had to be sure. We had to check your reports."

"And make certain tests?"

Webster nodded.

"Like Rover over there?"

"His name isn't Rover," said Webster, gently. "If you've been calling him that, you've hurt his feelings. All the dogs have human names. This one's Elmer."

Elmer had stopped his digging, was trotting toward them. He sat down beside Webster's chair, scrubbed at his dirt-filled whiskers with a clay-smeared paw.

"What about it, Elmer?" asked Webster.

"He's human, all right," said the dog, "but not all human. Not a mutant, you know. But something else. Something alien."

"That's to be expected," said Fowler. "I was a Loper for five years."

Webster nodded. "You'd retain part of the personality. That's understandable. And the dog would spot it. They're sensitive to things like that. Psychic, almost. That's why we put them on the mutants. They can sniff one out no matter where he is."

"You mean that you believe me?"

Webster rustled the papers in his lap, smoothed them out with a careful hand.

"I'm afraid I do."

"Why afraid?"

"Because," Webster told him, "you're the greatest threat mankind's ever faced."

"Threat! Man, don't you understand? I'm offering you . . . offering you—"

"Yes, I know," said Webster. "The word is Paradise."

"And you're afraid of that?"

"Terrified," said Webster. "Just try to envision what it would mean if we told the people and the people all believed. Everyone would want to go to Jupiter and become a Loper. The very fact that the Lopers apparently have life spans running into thousands of years would be reason enough if there were no others."

"We would be faced by a system-wide demand that everyone immediately be sent to Jupiter. No one would want to

remain human. In the end there would be no humans—all the humans would be Lopers. Had you thought of that?"

Fowler licked his lips with a nervous tongue. "Certainly. That is what I had expected."

"The human race would disappear," said Webster, speaking evenly. "It would be wiped out. It would junk all the progress it has made over thousands of years. It would disappear just when it is on the verge of its greatest advancement."

"But you don't know," protested Fowler. "You can't know. You've never been a Loper. I have." He tapped his chest. "I know what it's like."

Webster shook his head. "I'm not arguing on that score. I'm ready to concede that it may be better to be a Loper than a human. What I can't concede is that we would be justified in wiping out the human race—that we should trade what the human race has done and will do for what the Lopers might do. The human race is going places. Maybe not so pleasantly nor so clear-headedly nor as brilliantly as your Lopers, but in the long run I have a feeling that it will go much farther. We have a racial heritage and a racial destiny that we can't throw away."

Fowler leaned forward in his chair. "Look," he said, "I've played this fair. I came straight to you and the World Committee. I could have told the press and radio and forced your hand, but I didn't do it."

"What you're getting at," suggested Webster, "is that the World Committee doesn't have the right to decide this thing themselves. You're suggesting that the people have their say about it."

Fowler nodded, tight-lipped.

"Frankly," said Webster, "I don't trust the people. You'd get mob reaction. Selfish response. Not a one of them would think about the race, but only of itself."

"Are you telling me," asked Fowler, "that I'm right, but you can't do a thing about it?"

"Not exactly. We'll have to work out something. Maybe Jupiter could be made a sort of old folks' home. After a man had lived out a useful life—"

Fowler made a tearing sound of disgust deep inside his throat. "A reward," he snapped. "Turning an old horse out to pasture. Paradise by special dispensation."

"That way," Webster pointed out, "we'd save the human race and still have Jupiter."

Fowler came to his feet in a swift, lithe motion. "I'm sick of it," he shouted.

"I brought you a thing you wanted to know. A thing you spent billions of dollars and, so far as you knew, hundreds of lives, to find out. You set up reconversion stations all over Jupiter and you sent out men by dozens and they never came back and you thought that they were dead and still you sent out others. And none of them came back — because they didn't want to come back, because they couldn't come back, because they couldn't stomach being men again. Then I came back and what does it amount to? A lot of high-flown talk . . . a lot of quibbling . . . questioning me and doubting me. Then finally saying I am all right, but that I made a mistake in coming back at all.

He let his arms fall to his side and his shoulders drooped.

"I'm free, I suppose," he said. "I don't need to stay here."

Webster nodded slowly. "Certainly, you are free. You were free all the time. I only asked that you stay until I could check."

"I could go back to Jupiter?"

"In the light of the situation," said Webster, "that might be a good idea."

"I'm surprised you didn't suggest it," said Fowler, bitterly. "It would be an out for you. You could file away the report and forget about it and go on running the Solar System like a child's game played on a parlor floor. Your family has blundered its way through centuries and the people let you come back for more. One of your ancestors lost the world the Juwain philosophy and another blocked the effort of the humans to co-operate with the mutants—"

Webster spoke sharply. "Leave me and my family out of this, Fowler! It is a thing that's bigger—"

But Fowler was shouting, drowning out his words. "And I'm not going to let you bungle this. The world has lost enough because of you Websters. Now the world's going to get a break. I'm going to tell the people about Jupiter. I'll tell the press and radio. I'll yell it from the housetops. I'll—"

His voice broke and his shoulders shook.

Webster's voice was cold with sudden rage. "I'll fight you, Fowler. I'll go on the beam against you. I can't let you do a thing like this."

Fowler had swung around, was striding toward the garden gate.

Webster, frozen in his chair, felt the paw clawing at his leg.

"Shall I get him, Boss?" asked Elmer. "Shall I go and get him?"

Webster shook his head. "Let him go," he said. "He has as much right as I have to do the thing he wishes."

A chill wind came across the garden wall and rustled the cape about Webster's shoulders.

Words beat in his brain—words that had been spoken here in this garden scant seconds ago, but words that came from centuries away. *One of your ancestors lost the Juwain philosophy. One of your ancestors—*

Webster clenched his fists until the nails dug into his palms.

A jinx, thought Webster. That's what we are. A jinx upon humanity. The Juwain philosophy. And the mutants. But the mutants had had the Juwain philosophy for centuries now and they had never used it. Joe had stolen it from Grant and Grant had spent his life trying to get it back. But he never had.

Maybe, thought Webster, trying to console himself, it really didn't amount to much. If it had, the mutants would have used it. Or maybe—just maybe—the mutants had been bluffing. Maybe they didn't know any more about it than the humans did.

A metallic voice coughed softly and Webster looked up. A small gray robot stood just outside the doorway.

"The call, sir," said the robot. "The call you've been expecting."

Jenkins' face came into the plate—an old face, obsolete and ugly. Not the smooth, lifelike face boasted by the latest model robots.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir," he said, "but it is most unusual. Joe came up and asked to use our visor to put in a call to you. Won't tell me what he wants, sir. Says it's just a friendly call to an oldtime neighbor."

"Put him on," said Webster.

"He went at it most unusual, sir," persisted Jenkins. "He came up and sat around and chewed the fat for an hour or more before he asked to use it. I'd say, if you'd pardon me, that it's most peculiar."

"I know," said Webster. "Joe is peculiar, in a lot of ways."

Jenkins' face faded from the screen and another face came in—that of Joe, the mutant. It was a strong face with a wrinkled, leathery skin and blue-gray eyes that twinkled, hair that was just turning salt and pepper at the temples.

"Jenkins doesn't trust me, Tyler," said Joe and Webster felt his hackles rising at the laughter that lurked behind the words.

"For that matter," he told him bluntly, "neither do I."

Joe clucked with his tongue. "Why, Tyler, we've never given you a single minute's trouble. Not a single one of us. You've watched us and you've worried and fretted about us, but we've never hurt you. You've had so many of the dogs spying on us that we stumble over them everywhere we turn and you've kept files on us and studied us and talked us up and down until you must be sick to death of it."

"We know you," said Webster, grimly. "We know more about you than you know about yourselves. We know how many there are of you and we know each of you personally. Want to know what any one of you were doing at any given moment in the last hundred years or so? Ask us and we'll tell you."

Butter wouldn't have melted in Joe's mouth. "And all the time," he said, "we were thinking kindly of you. Figuring out how sometime we might want to help you."

"Why didn't you do it, then?" snapped Webster. "We were ready to work with you at first. Even after you stole the Juwain philosophy from Grant—"

"Stole it?" asked Joe. "Surely, Tyler, you must have that wrong. We only took it so we could work it out. It was all botched up, you know."

"You probably figured it out the day after you had your hands on it," Webster told him, flatly. "What were you waiting for? Any time you had offered that to us we'd known that you were with us and we'd have worked with you. We'd have called off the dogs, we'd have accepted you."

"Funny thing," said Joe. "We never seemed to care about being accepted."

And the old laughter was back again, the laughter of a man who was sufficient to himself, who saw the whole fabric of the human community of effort as a vast, ironic joke. A man who walked alone and liked it. A man who saw the human race as something that was funny and probably just a little dangerous—but funnier than ever because it was dangerous. A man who felt no need of the brotherhood of man, who rejected that brotherhood as a thing as utterly provincial and pathetic as the twentieth century booster clubs.

"O.K." said Webster sharply. "If that's the way you want it. I'd hoped that maybe you had a deal to offer—some chance of conciliation. We don't like things as they are—we'd rather they were different. But the move is up to you."

"Now, Tyler," protested Joe, "no use in flying off the handle. I was thinking maybe you'd ought to know about the Juwain philosophy. You've sort of forgotten about it now, but there was a time when the System was all stirred up about it."

"All right," said Webster, "go ahead and tell me." The tone of his voice said he knew Joe wouldn't.

"Basically," said Joe, "you humans are a lonely lot of folks. You never have known your fellow-man. You can't know him because you haven't the common touch of understanding that makes it possible to know him. You have friendships, sure, but those friendships are based on pure emotions, never on real understanding. You get along together, sure. But you get along by tolerance rather than by understanding. You work out your problems by agreement, but that agreement is simply a matter of the stronger minded among you beating down the opposition of the weaker ones."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Why, everything," Joe told him. "With the Juwain philosophy you'd actually understand."

"Telepathy?" asked Webster.

"Not exactly," said Joe. "We mutants have telepathy. But this is something different. The Juwain philosophy provides an ability to sense the viewpoint of another. It won't necessarily make you agree with that viewpoint, but it does make you recognize it. You not only know what the other fellow is talking about, but how he feels about it. With Juwain's philosophy you have to accept the validity of another man's ideas and knowledge, not just the words he says, but the thought back of the words."

"Semantics," said Webster.

"If you insist on the term," Joe told him. "What it really means is that you understand not only the intrinsic meaning, but the implied meaning of what someone else is saying. Almost telepathy, but not quite. A whole lot better, some ways."

"And Joe, how do you go about it? How do you—"

The laughter was back again. "You think about it a while, Tyler . . . find out how bad you want it. Then maybe we can talk."

"Horse trading," said Webster.

Joe nodded.

"Booby-trapped, too, I suppose," said Webster.

"Couple of them," said Joe. "You find them and we'll talk about that, too."

"What are you fellows going to want?"

"Plenty," Joe told him, "but maybe it'll be worth it."

The screen went dead and Webster sat staring at it with unseeing eyes. Booby-trapped? Of course it was. Clear up to the hilt.

Webster screwed his eyes shut and felt the blood pounding in his brain.

What was it that had been claimed for the Juwain philosophy in that far-gone day when it had been lost? That it would have put mankind a hundred thousand years ahead in two short generations. Something like that.

Maybe stretching it a bit—but not too much. A little justified exaggeration, that was all.

Men understanding one another, accepting one another's ideas at face value, each man seeing behind the words, seeing the thing as someone else would see it and accepting that concept as if it were his own. Making it, in fact, part of his own knowledge that could be brought to bear upon the subject at hand. No misunderstanding, no prejudice, no bias, no jangling—but a clear, complete grasp of all the conflicting angles of any human problem. Applicable to anything, to any type of human endeavor. To sociology, to psychology, to engineering, to all the various facets of a complex civilization. No more bungling, no more quarreling, but honest and sincere appraisal of the facts and the ideas at hand.

A hundred thousand years in two generations? Perhaps not too far off, at that.

But booby-trapped? Or was it? Did the mutants really mean to part with it? For any kind of price? Just another bait dangled in front of mankind's eyes while around the corner the mutants rolled with laughter.

The mutants hadn't used it. Of course, they hadn't, for they had no real need of it. They already had telepathy and that would serve the purpose as far as the mutants were concerned. Individualists would have little use for a device which would make them understand one another, for they would not care whether they understood one another. The mutants got along together, apparently, tolerating whatever contact was necessary to safeguard their interests. But that was all. They'd work together to save their skins, but they found no pleasure in it.

An honest offer? A bait, a lure to hold man's attention in one quarter while a dirty deal was being pulled off in another? A mere ironic joke? Or an offer that had a stinger in it?

Webster shook his head. There was no telling. No way to gauge a mutant's motives or his reason.

Soft, glowing light had crept into the walls and ceiling of the office with the departing of the day, the automatic, hidden light growing stronger as the darkness fell. Webster glanced at the window, saw that it was an oblong of blackness, dotted by the few advertising signs that flared and flickered on the city's skyline.

He reached out, thumbed over a tumbler, spoke to the secretary in the outer office.

"I'm sorry I kept you so long. I forgot the time."

"That's all right, sir," said the secretary. "There's a visitor to see you. Mr. Fowler."

"Fowler?"

"Yes, the gentleman from Jupiter."

"I know," said Webster, wearily. "Ask him to come in."

He had almost forgotten Fowler and the threat the man had made.

He stared absent-mindedly at his desk, saw the kaleidoscope lying where he'd left it. *Funny toy*, he thought. *Quaint idea. A simple thing for the simple minds of long ago. But the kid would get a boot out of it.*

He reached out a hand and grasped it, lifted it to his eyes. The transmitted light wove a pattern of crazy color, a geometric nightmare. He twirled the tube a bit and the pattern changed. And yet again—

His brain wrenched with a sudden sickness and the color burned itself into his mind in a single flare of soul-twisting torture.

The tube dropped and clattered on the desk. Webster reached out with both hands and clutched at the desk edge.

And through his brain went the thought of horror: *What a toy for a kid!*

The sickness faded and he sat stock-still, brain clear again, breath coming regularly.

Funny, he thought. *Funny that it should do a thing like that. Or could it have been something else and not the kaleidoscope at all? A seizure of some sort. Heart acting up. A bit too young for that and he'd been checked just recently.*

The door clicked and Webster looked up.

Fowler came across the room with measured step, slowly, until he stood across from the desk.

"Yes, Fowler?"

"I left in anger," Fowler said, "and I

didn't want it that way. You might have understood, but again you might not have. It was just that I was upset, you see. I came from Jupiter, feeling that finally all the years I'd spent there in the domes had been justified, that all the anguish I had felt when I saw the men go out somehow had paid off. I was bringing news, you understand, news that the world had waited. To me it was the most wonderful thing that could have happened and I thought the people would see it. It was as if I had been bringing them word that Paradise was just around the corner. For that is what it is, Webster . . . that is what it is."

He put his hands flat upon the desk and leaned forward, whispering.

"You see how it is, don't you, Webster? You understand a bit."

Webster's hands were shaking and he laid them in his lap, clenched them together until the fingers hurt.

"Yes," he whispered back. "Yes, I think I know."

For he did know.

Knew more than the words had told him. Knew the anguish and the pleading and bitter disappointment that lay behind the words. Knew them almost as if he'd said the words himself—almost as if he were Fowler.

Fowler's voice broke in alarm. "What's the matter, Webster? What's the trouble with you?"

Webster tried to speak and the words were dust. His throat tightened until there was a knot of pain above his Adam's apple.

He tried again and the words were low and forced. "Tell me, Fowler. Tell me something straight. You learned a lot of things out there. Things that men don't know or know imperfectly. Like high grade telepathy, maybe . . . or . . . or—"

"Yes," said Fowler, "a lot of things. But I didn't bring them back with me. When I became a man again, that was all I was. Just a man, that's all. None of it came back. Most of it just hazy memories and a . . . well, you might call it yearning."

"You mean that you haven't a one of the abilities that you had when you were a Loper?"

"Not a single one."

"You couldn't, by chance, be able to make me understand a thing you wanted me to know. Make me feel the way you feel."

"Not a chance," said Fowler.

Webster reached out a hand, pushed the kaleidoscope gently with his finger.

It rolled forward a ways, came to rest again.

"What did you come back for?" asked Webster.

"To square myself with you," said Fowler. "To let you know I wasn't really sore. To try to make you understand that I had a side, too. Just a difference of opinion, that's all. I thought maybe we might shake on it."

"I see. And you're still determined to go out and tell the people?"

Fowler nodded. "I have to, Webster. You must surely know that. It's . . . it's well, almost a religion with me. It's something I believe in. I have to tell the rest of them that there's a better world and a better life. I have to lead them to it."

"A messiah," said Webster.

Fowler straightened. "That's one thing I was afraid of. Scoffing isn't—"

"I wasn't scoffing," Webster told him, almost gently.

He picked up the kaleidoscope, polished its tube with the palm of his hand, considering. *Not yet*, he thought. *Not yet. Have to think it out. Do I want him to understand me as well as I understand him?*

"Look, Fowler," he said, "lay off a day or two. Wait a bit. Just a day or two. Then let us talk again."

"I've waited long enough already."

"But I want you to think this over: A million years ago man first came into being—just an animal. Since that time he has inched his way up a cultural ladder. Bit by painful bit he has developed a way of life, a philosophy, a way of doing things. His progress has been geometrical. Today he does much more than he did yesterday. Tomorrow he'll do even more than he did today. For the first time in human history, Man is really beginning to hit the ball. He's just got a good start, the first stride, you might say. He's going a lot farther in a lot less time than he's come already."

"Maybe it isn't as pleasant as Jupiter, maybe not the same at all. Maybe humankind is drab compared with the life forms of Jupiter. But it's man's life. It's the thing he's fought for. It's the thing he's made himself. It's a destiny he has shaped."

"I hate to think, Fowler, that just when we're going good we'll swap our destiny for one we don't know about, for one we can't be sure about."

"I'll wait," said Fowler. "Just a day or two. But I'm warning you. You can't put me off. You can't change my mind."

"That's all I ask," said Webster. He rose and held out his hand. "Shake on it?" he asked.

But even as he shook Fowler's hand, Webster knew it wasn't any good. Juwain philosophy or not, mankind was heading for a showdown. A showdown that would be even worse because of the Juwain philosophy. For the mutants wouldn't miss a bet. If this was to be their joke, if this was their way of getting rid of the human race, they wouldn't overlook a thing. By tomorrow morning every man, woman and child somehow or other would have managed to look through a kaleidoscope. Or something else. Lord only knew how many other ways there were.

He watched until Fowler had closed the door behind him, then walked to the window and stared out. Flashing on the skyline of the city was a new advertising sign—one that had not been there before. A crazy sign that made crazy colored patterns in the night. Flashing on and off as if one were turning a kaleidoscope.

Webster stared at it, tight-lipped.

He should have expected it.

He thought of Joe with a flare of murderous fury surging through his brain. For that call had been a cackling chortle behind a covering hand, a smart-Aleck gesture designed to let man know what it was all about, to let him know after he was behind the eight-ball and couldn't do a thing about it.

We should have killed them off, thought Webster, and was surprised at the calm coldness of the thought. *We should have stamped them out like we would a dangerous disease.*

But man had forsaken violence as a world and individual policy. Not for one hundred twenty-five years had one group been arrayed against another. group in violence.

When Joe had called, the Juwain philosophy had lain on the desk. I only had to reach out my hand and touch it. Webster thought.

He stiffened with the realization of it. I had only to reach out my hand and touch it. *And I did just that!*

Something more than telepathy, something more than guessing. Joe knew he would pick up the kaleidoscope—must have known it. Foresight—an ability to roll back the future. Just an hour or so, perhaps, but that would be enough.

Joe—and the other mutants, of course—had known about Fowler. Their probing, telepathic minds could have told them all that they wished to know. But

this was something else, something different.

He stood at the window, staring at the sign. Thousands of people, he knew, were seeing it. Seeing it and feeling that sudden sick impact in their mind.

Webster frowned, wondering about the shifting pattern of the lights. Some physiological impact upon a certain center of the human brain, perhaps. A portion of the brain that had not been used before—a portion of the brain that in due course of human development might naturally have come into its proper function. A function now that was being forced.

The Juwain philosophy, at last! Something for which men had sought for centuries, now finally come to pass. Given man at a time when he'd have been better off without it.

Fowler had written in his report: *I cannot give a factual account because there are no words for the facts that I want to tell.* He still didn't have the words, of course, but he had something else that was even better—an audience that could understand the sincerity and the greatness which lay beneath the words he did have. An audience with a new-found sense which would enable them to grasp some of the mighty scope of the thing Fowler had to tell.

Joe had planned it that way. Had waited for this moment. Had used the Juwain philosophy as a weapon against the human race.

For the Juwain philosophy, man would go to Jupiter. Faced by all the logic in the world, he still would go to Jupiter. For better or for worse, he would go to Jupiter.

The only chance there had ever been of winning against Fowler had been Fowler's inability to describe what he saw, to tell what he felt, to reach the people with a clear exposition of the message that he brought. With mere human words that message would have been vague and fuzzy and while the people at first might have believed, they would have been shaky in their belief, would have listened to other argument.

But now that chance was gone, for the words would be no longer vague and fuzzy. The people would know, as clearly and as vibrantly as Fowler knew himself, what Jupiter was like.

The people would go to Jupiter, would enter upon a life other than the human life.

And the Solar System, the entire Solar System, with the exception of Jupiter, would lie open for the new race of

mutants to take over, to develop any kind of culture that they might wish—a culture that would scarcely follow the civilization of the parent race.

Webster swung away from the window, strode back to the desk. He stooped and pulled out a drawer, reached inside. His hand came out clutching something that he had never dreamed of using—a relic, a museum piece he had tossed there years before.

With a handkerchief, he polished the metal of the gun, tested its mechanism with trembling fingers.

Fowler was the key. With Fowler dead—

With Fowler dead and the Jupiter stations dismantled and abandoned, the mutants would be licked. Man would have the Juwain philosophy and would retain his destiny. The Centauri expedition would blast off for the stars. The life experiments would continue on Pluto. Man would march along the course that his culture plotted.

Faster than ever before. Faster than anyone could dream.

Two great strides. The renunciation of violence as a human policy—the understanding that came with the Juwain philosophy. The two great things that would speed man along the road to wherever he was going.

The renunciation of the violence and the—

Webster stared at the gun clutched in his hand and heard the roar of winds tumbling through his head.

Two great strides—and he was about to toss away the first.

For one hundred twenty-five years no man had killed another—for more than a thousand years killing had been obsolete as a factor in the determination of human affairs.

A thousand years of peace and one death might undo the work. One shot in the night might collapse the structure, might hurl man back to the old bestial thinking.

Webster killed—why can't I? After all, there are some men who should be killed. Webster did right, but—he shouldn't have stopped with only one. I don't see why they're hanging him, he'd ought to get a medal. We ought to start on the mutants first. If it hadn't been for them—

That was the way they'd talk.

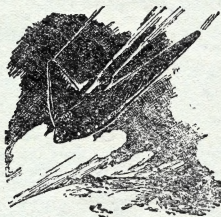
That, thought Webster, is the wind that's roaring in my brain.

The flashing of the crazy colored sign also made a ghostly flicker along the walls and floor.

Fowler is seeing that, thought Webster. He is looking at it and even if he isn't, I still have the kaleidoscope.

He'll be coming in and we'll sit down and talk. We'll sit down and talk—

He tossed the gun back into the drawer, walked toward the door.



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